

# **Indigenous Business Toolkit Project**

## **The Basics of Communications for Indigenous Businesses**

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# The Basics of Communications for Indigenous Businesses

## Summary

When things go wrong in an organization, they're often blamed on poor communications. This is also the case in Indigenous businesses, particularly given the numerous stakeholders who have an interest in the work being done and the outcomes that are expected, as well as the multiple objectives that Indigenous businesses are trying to achieve. But what makes good communications?

This module is a starter guide focused on basic principles and information to help you gain a basic understanding of communications. Specifically, the module examines the importance of trust, the need to be professional, and the need to know and understand your audience. A companion module provides details on communication tools and approaches.<sup>1</sup>

Communication can be complicated, and communication tools and tactics are constantly changing, so it's hard to know what to do – and what not to. In fact, figuring out what not to do is just as important as figuring out what to do. Communication is also costly and it's easy to spend a fortune on this activity.

We recommend consulting with a communications expert to help you meet your communication needs. However, if you understand the basics, you're better able to help guide the experts you work with to get the results you want.



## The Elements of Successful Business Communications

Business communication plays a vital role in facilitating coordination, collaboration, decision-making, and innovation within a business. Done properly, business communication helps businesses to be successful.

As shown in Table 1, business communications should be clear and precise, be directed at a specific audience, have a specific purpose, and be professional. It is also important that communication encourage two-way dialogue and be adaptive and flexible.

The remainder of this module examines a number of these key elements in more detail. Specifically, the module examines the importance of trust, the need to be professional, and the need to know and understand your audience.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1. Key Elements of Business Communication**

Key Elements	Details
Clarity and Precision	Effective business communication requires clear and precise language to convey information accurately and avoid misunderstandings. This includes using appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and formatting.
Purpose and Audience	Business communication should be tailored to a specific purpose and audience. Whether it's delivering a presentation, writing a report, or sending an email, understanding the needs and expectations of the intended recipients is crucial.
Professionalism and Etiquette	Communication highlights a company's values and brand identity. To maintain a positive reputation and build trust with stakeholders, business communication should adhere to professional standards and etiquette, including politeness, respect, and confidentiality.
Channels and Mediums	Business communications use a variety of channels and mediums, such as face-to-face meetings, emails, phone calls, video conferences, memos, reports, and presentations. The choice of communication channel depends on factors such as urgency, complexity, and audience preferences.
Feedback and Engagement	Effective communication fosters two-way dialogue, encouraging feedback, questions, and discussion. This promotes engagement, collaboration, and mutual understanding among stakeholders.
Adaptability and Flexibility	In today's dynamic business environment, effective communication requires adaptability and flexibility to respond to changing circumstances, emerging opportunities, and evolving technologies.

## Building Trust is #1

The single biggest goal for any communications activity is to build trust with your audience. The first part of gaining trust is to BE trustworthy. Your organization needs to be a good citizen. It must walk the path you say it will walk.

Here are two basic guiding principles to follow that are rooted in Cree words:

- **Tâpwêwin.** Speak with precision and accuracy. Be authentic. Always tell the truth!
- **Miyo-wîcêhtowin.** Get along with others. Be respectful and courteous.

These two guiding principles can serve as a simple but effective test for all your communications.

Here are some other specific ways to build trust:

1. Tell a story. Indigenous people have passed along knowledge through storytelling for many generations. These stories connected emotionally with their audience and made new concepts relatable to their audience's experience. While your communications today might use new tools, they still need to tell a story.
2. Build a relationship. With some of your audiences, this will be an in-person relationship, through attending meetings or by attending conferences and events. With others, it will be through advertising or social media.
3. Timing is key. Communications today are expected to be quick. But it's important to establish an order of communications too. Your board chair shouldn't be the last one to find out you just bought a company. Tip: Put together a check list of everyone who needs to know announcements and in what order.
4. Consider confidentiality. Your communications need to strike a balance between being open and transparent, while maintaining confidentiality for both competitive and personal reasons. You must also consider legal requirements, such as Non-disclosure Agreements (NDAs) and privacy laws.
5. Think of your audience. This is part of Miyo-wîcêhtowin, being respectful and courteous. It's perfectly fine to use terms like CSS, ethernet, and Boolean operator in a room full of IT people, but other audiences wouldn't have a clue what you mean. Use plain language. And remember – for some of your audience members, English is a second language. Keep it simple and everyone will appreciate it.
6. Be proactive. Wherever you can, get ahead of the communications, rather than always responding (reactive).

7. Be consistent. If you decide to do a quarterly newsletter, do it every quarter. If you decide to hold an annual meeting in September, do it every September. If you decide to post a throwback Thursday post on your Facebook account, do it every Thursday. Whatever you decide, set a schedule and stick to it.
8. Listening is as important as talking. Ask for feedback and when you get it, listen.
9. Be careful what you write. When you send a text or email, it's easy for someone to take a screenshot or share it. Write all your communications as though they could end up in the news or on a Facebook post.

### Look Professional

Part of building trust is looking professional. Here are some basic things that will help your organization look like a pro:

1. Brand. This is more than just your logo. It's who your organization is. What's your mission? What's your vision, or where do you want to be in one, two or seven generations? What's your organization's personality? For example, are your communications going to be serious, or are jokes okay? What's your story? What makes you unique? Your brand should fit who you are as an organization, and appeal to your main audiences. For some businesses, the brand focuses on their Indigenous identity; for others, the brand focuses on their business side, and many are a combination of both. Brands can require many thousands of dollars to develop or a few hundred.

Figure 1 shows an example of the logo for the Peter Ballantyne Group of Companies. The logo nicely captures the Peter Ballantyne Group of Companies' brand by showing a mix of their Indigenous roots and their business operations



#### Figure 1. Peter Ballantyne Group of Companies Logo

The Peter Ballantyne Group of Companies logo is based on an Eagle with eight feathers, each representing one of their eight communities. The logo is simple and appealing to both their community membership (Chief and Council, employees, community members) and potential business partners (banks, government, industry). Thanks to the Peter Ballantyne Group of Companies for permission to use their logo and story.

2. Branding guide. These are documents that show and tell how to follow your brand. This can be one page or fifty. For most small and medium-sized organizations, one or two pages is enough, and should include your logo (in both colour and black and white versions), the colours you will use (pantone and CMYK numbers included), and the name of the fonts you will use. Branding guides are useful to keep everyone on your team on the same page, keeping your look consistent, and your communications looking professional.<sup>3</sup>
3. Website. Your website is like a storefront, a place to go for people to learn more about you. Websites can range from very basic online brochures to very complicated information repositories. Websites take time and resources to develop – even the basic ones take a few months to develop. To reduce the risk that your website will appear unprofessional or not function properly, hire a developer or use a well-known platform, such as (at the time of this writing) Webflow or Wordpress. Using a well-known platform means that if something happens with your developer, another one can take over without you having to spend thousands on building a new site.
4. Tradeshow display pop-up. A basic one costs just a few hundred dollars and can be used for attending trade shows, career fairs, community events, and more. Make sure the pop-up follows the branding guide.
5. Brochure, business card, and letterhead. To be effective, these documents must follow the branding guide.

### **Know and Understand Your Audiences**

Every organization has many audiences and each needs different information. As an Indigenous business, your audiences may include your community members, Chief and Council, industry partners, board, management team, government, and the media.

To develop a communications plan, it's helpful to list your audiences and create a chart. For each different audience, it is important to record:

- What information does each audience need?
- When do they need it?
- How will the information be provided (Facebook? Newsletter? Website? Email? Video?)?
- Does the provision method correspond to the information they need and when they need it?
- Who will provide it?
- What will it cost?

Also, if you have an announcement to make, what order do you communicate it? Who must know first, second, and third?

It is important to add up all the costs and see if you can afford what you want to do. If you can't, you either need a bigger budget or, more likely, you'll need to cut or change some of the activities you want to do.

There are templates you can use to create a basic communication plan. The appendix provides an example of a basic communications plan. The Communication Tools module provides information on some of the tools and approaches used in communications.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Communicating to the Board***

Your board is one of your most important audiences. As representatives of the shareholders, the purpose of the board is to oversee and advise a company so it meets its objectives. The board needs the right information at the right time to fulfill this role.

Information on the role of board of directors can be found in the Role of Board module.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Reporting to the Shareholders***

Your shareholders are also a key audience. After all, they are your organization's owners. Here are some principles to keep in mind when you are planning your communications with shareholders:

1. Who are your shareholders? For many economic development corporations (EDCs), the shareholder is the Nation, which means you will be primarily communicating with Chief and Council. For other EDCs, the shareholder may be a municipal government, which means you will be communicating with mayor and council. For other businesses (e.g., those owned by multiple EDCs or by Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners), it is important to find out exactly who your shareholders are before you communicate with them.
2. You must be aware and follow any legal requirements. For example, non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) might obligate you to keep some things confidential from your shareholders. There may be legal requirements for communicating to your shareholders, such as holding an annual general meeting, or sending, sharing, or providing financials. Be sure to look at your corporate documents (e.g., Unanimous Shareholder Agreements (USA)) to ensure you include these requirements in your plan.
3. Striking a balance between transparency and remaining competitive is vital. You want to be transparent, but you don't want to give your competition information they can use to their advantage. A key issue is financial reporting. Some things are sensitive and careful thought should be given to what you can communicate and what you cannot. Consolidated financial reporting (e.g., presenting the financials of all your business

activities combined, instead of reporting each one individually) is one way to help your business achieve both objectives.<sup>6</sup>

4. The organization is responsible for communicating. Ideally, board members are usually not the ones who communicate on your organization's behalf. Management is responsible for operations and, and because of this, should be the ones who communicate to shareholders.
5. Be aware of privacy requirements. Employment numbers are normally something community members and industry partners are interested in. Be aware of privacy requirements before you communicate anything about employees. It's okay to tell employee success stories (and in fact, these stories are very good for everyone to hear!), but you must get the employee's written permission before sharing anything that could identify them.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Communicating With Your Community's Members***

Your community's members are one of your most important audiences. For most EDCs, the community members are ultimately the people you want your activities to benefit. Indeed, community members can be expected to have a strong interest in your organization, and in particular what your organization does for the community and the employment opportunities it provides.

The challenge is that most people struggle to fully understand what you do and why. Many of your activities are very detailed and are based on specialized knowledge. Thus, when you are planning your communications activities with membership, it's important to figure out how you're going to explain your organization. Keep it short. Keep it simple.

Most people struggle to understand financial terms, so it is important to find a way to explain key business concepts. Similarly, most people are not familiar with business and how it works. In addition, for some people, English is a second language. Remember that you are speaking to everyone, and it is thus important to accommodate a range of knowledge from beginner to expert.

It is important to ask, "What information are you comfortable with being made public?" Your community members are a wide audience, and it is reasonable to expect that anything you communicate with such an audience will likely become public knowledge. This is especially important to think about when you are considering what financial information to share.

One vitally important communication tool to keep in mind is word-of-mouth, or what many call the moccasin telegraph. Indigenous people have used oral communications to teach truths and values for generations, and oral communication remains an important feature in today's world. Nowadays, the moccasin telegraph has also gone digital, so it is faster than ever, and helps



connect people from isolated communities to others, both inside and outside of the community.

### ***Communicating With Other Stakeholders***

There are many other audiences to consider in your communications: media, potential business partners, other Indigenous businesses, students, employees, future employees, and more. Many of these audiences can be put into one category called “general public.” Others might be together in “partners.” It’s important to spend some time thinking about these audiences, what they want and need to know, and how you will communicate with them.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This module is a starter guide – a brief document meant to give Indigenous businesses an overview of communications, and a heads up on some potential pitfalls. This guide doesn’t include everything, which is why it’s critical to reach out to legal and other experts where and when you need it.

The key takeaway is that your goal for communications is to build trust and tell your story. Spend a day or so each year planning your communications activities and be realistic about what you can do consistently. It might take you a few years to build your communications to the point where you want them to be, and that’s okay. There will always be a big wish list for communications. First, do the things you are legally obligated to do, then start working on the rest.

Work with a communications professional when you need to. If you can hire one, even better.

And remember the two biggest tests for all your communications:

- **Tâpwêwin.** Speak with precision and accuracy. Be authentic. Always tell the truth!
- **Miyo-wîcêhtowin.** Get along with others. Be respectful and courteous.

### **Resources**

Athabasca Basin Development. 2013. Visual ID Guide. <https://athabascabasin.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ABD-Visual-ID-Guide-Web.pdf>

Bachiu, V., M. Fulton, and K. Jackson. 2024a. Communication Tools. Indigenous Business Toolkit Project. Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan. <https://www.schoolofpublicpolicy.sk.ca/research-ideas/projects-and-labs/indigenous-leadership-governance-and-development-project.php>.

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Des Nedhe Group. 2024. DNG 2023 Report to the Community.

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Government of Canada. 2024. First Nations Communications Toolkit: <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100021860/1614352707074>

Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada. 2024. Summary of Privacy Laws in Canada.

Accessed at [https://www.priv.gc.ca/en/privacy-topics/privacy-laws-in-canada/02\\_05\\_d\\_15/](https://www.priv.gc.ca/en/privacy-topics/privacy-laws-in-canada/02_05_d_15/).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Bachiu, Fulton, and Jackson (2024a).

<sup>2</sup> For a basic overview of communications planning, activities and tools, see Government of Canada (2024).

<sup>3</sup> For an example of a visual branding guide, see Athabasca Basin Development (2013).

<sup>4</sup> See Bachiu, Fulton, and Jackson (2024a).

<sup>5</sup> See Bachiu, Fulton, and Jackson (2024b).

<sup>6</sup> For an example of an annual report that presents consolidated financials, see Des Nedhe Group's Report to the Community (Des Nedhe Group 2024).

<sup>7</sup> For details on privacy requirements, see Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada (2024).

## **Indigenous Business Toolkit Project**

The Indigenous Business Toolkit Project is designed to provide Indigenous communities and individuals with the practical tools they and their advisors can use to undertake successful economic development. Indigenous economic development is more successful when everyone – community members, community leaders, consultants, business professionals, employees, and/or potential partners – understands its many aspects.

The Toolkit provides step-by-step instructions on selected aspects of economic development based on the best practices of leaders in the field. The modules in the Toolkit cover everything from the role of economic development in nation building, to the importance of business charters, to the various legal forms that can be used to pursue economic development, to the steps needed to identify and negotiate beneficial partnerships, to the governance challenges that economic development must address.

The modules are available for free and for use by anyone. The full set of Toolkit modules can be found at: <https://www.schoolofpublicpolicy.sk.ca/research-ideas/projects-and-labs/indigenous-leadership-governance-and-development-project.php>.

The Indigenous Business Toolkit Project is part of the larger Indigenous Leadership: Governance and Development project designed to support long-term Indigenous economic development. In addition to the toolkit, the larger project involves capturing the economic development experience of Saskatchewan Indigenous communities through a series of case studies. The case studies, along with a description of the larger project, can be found at the website listed above.

### **Disclaimer**

The information contained in this document is designed to provide an overview of a particular topic and should not replace legal and other expert advice. Groups wishing to use the concepts discussed should receive the appropriate professional advice necessary to ensure their specific goals and circumstances are considered and recognized.

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