

AIA Design Assistance Team (DAT) Media and Public Relations Plan

A carefully developed public relations program is essential to the long-term effectiveness of a Design Assistance Team effort and can help ensure the successful implementation of your action plan. Your public relations strategy should include media and community relations that promote the visibility of design Assistance activities and that encourage broad-based participation throughout the process.

The presentation of clear and unified messages is critical. A single person should speak for the steering committee whenever possible; this is typically the steering committee chair or a senior community staff person assigned this responsibility.

The goal is to get the community and key stakeholders to understand and participate in the process. Media includes traditional media and any outreach which will involve community members and key stakeholders.

Following are some suggested public relations activities, listed according to the four-part process. Not all of them will be appropriate to your community. Press releases are frequently not necessary in smaller communities where you can develop a relationship with local reporters and editors. Note that some activities listed under one phase may require earlier coordination or lead time.

Remember, the media work under strict time schedules and occasionally have unexpected opportunities to provide you coverage. Be ready to respond immediately to media inquiries and to help the media help you by following through on any media questions or information needs.

Phases of the DAT Public Relations Plan

Phase 1: Getting Started

- Identify an experienced person to coordinate all public relations activities. This should be someone who knows the local participants, the local media market, and other outlets for getting information out to the community. In generating all press materials and public announcements, the public relations coordinator should work directly with the team leader and the project manager.
- Establish a database of local media outlets and contacts. Include newspapers, community newsletters, radio and television stations, magazines, business publications, local access cable, community home pages, and other electronic media.
- Establish a database of key stakeholders and opinion leaders with names, addresses, phone numbers, and email. The database should identify stakeholders and opinion leaders for which personal invitations are desirable. It should also identify steering committee members or others who are best suited to make these personal invitations. When inviting people to participate in a meeting, no amount of media saturation is as effective as personal invitations.
- Create a web presence for the project (typically as a part of an existing web site).

Phase 2: Getting Organized

- Establish an information headquarters. This might be the local AIA component office, the chamber of commerce, local government, or the office of a steering committee member.
- Develop a complete strategy and timeline for all public relations activities, noting media deadlines (three to four months in advance for magazines, two to three weeks ahead for weekly publications, etc.).
- Solicit feature stories, special inserts, and op-ed (opinion and editorial) pieces in local or regional newspapers and magazines, working with editors three to six months in advance of the publication dates.
- Identify potential story subjects for pre-publicity (e.g., news features that focus on the problems that will be addressed by the Design Assistance Team, etc.).

- Meet with key reporters and officials (including media editorial boards) to brief them on the Design Assistance process.
- Develop an article that could be published in community organization newsletters, creating awareness of the Design Assistance process and announcing opportunities for public input.
- Work with steering committee members to encourage them to write appropriate letters to the editor of key print and on-line media, including any local blogs.
- Develop a comprehensive but concise press kit that explains the community's issues and the Design Assistance process. Inserts will include a background piece that describes the project study area, a list of the Design Assistance Team members with brief biographical summaries, an abbreviated summary of the issues, and press releases. In some communities, working directly with reporters and editors to find out their information needs and meet those needs is more effective than a press kit.
- Consider developing a special Design Assistance Team newsletter for distribution to community members and others connected to the DAT effort. This can be a very effective way of maintaining continuity and public interest throughout the four-part process.
- Use the evaluation visit to demonstrate support, raise public awareness, and answer skeptics.
- Provide detailed information on the design problem, the DAT process, and any related planning processes on the project web site.
- Plan direct mailings or door-to-door invitations (do not use mail boxes for handouts without postage) for key stakeholders and opinion leaders. For projects in a small geographic region (a downtown center), it is often desirable to make sure that every property owner, every business owner, and every resident receives information on the program.

- Plan personal invitations to ensure that representatives of each stakeholder interest and key opinion leaders are personally included in each project.
- Consider retaining print media and electronic media clipping services. Create a clip file and system for distribution to key participants.

Phase 3: Team Visit

- Notify the public via direct mail, published notices, and press releases of the “town meeting” and all community forums held to gain public input during the team visit. This is critically important and should be coordinated well before the visit. Newspaper coverage is extremely helpful. Consider buying ad space in the local paper for a public invitation.
- Invite the media to participate in the team tour.
- Invite the media to Design Assistance Team’s “town meeting.”
- Invite the media to observe activities in the work space, ensuring their presence is not disruptive. This must be coordinated with the team leader.
- Develop a press release that summarizes the final results of the team’s report. This can be done after work is completed and before the final presentation.
- Invite print and electronic media to a press conference following the team’s presentation to the steering committee. Have press kits and the final press release available for distribution to the press at the event or in advance. (Discourage media coverage of the presentation in order to allow candid discussion between the team and the steering committee.)
- Schedule radio interviews by telephone or in-studio television interviews if reporters are not able to attend the final presentation.
- Schedule radio and television talk show appearances by the team leader immediately following presentation of the results.
- Develop a strategy for distribution of the final report to key community and elected leaders after the presentation.

- Promote a separate supplement in the local newspaper summarizing the report or even reproducing it in its entirety.
- Develop an article summarizing the report for use in organizational newsletters (service clubs, community groups, design and planning organizations, civic groups, environmental organizations, historic preservation groups, business organizations, etc.).

Phase 4: Implementation

- Notify the public via direct mail, published notices, and press releases of all community forums and workshops the implementation committee might hold to solicit public reaction to the team report. Consider publishing an invitation in the local paper. This will be important at two points during this phase: (1) during the implementation committee's discussion of the report and development of goals and objectives, and (2) at the time of the follow-up visit to encourage participation in the public meeting with team members.
- If a newsletter has not been published in previous phases, consider establishing one now. Continue to try to place stories in other community groups' newsletters.
- Develop a press release announcing publication of the action plan.
- Establish a distribution strategy for the action plan.
- Maximize every opportunity to announce progress on or completion of action plan objectives.
- Schedule radio and television interviews with the team members following the presentation.
- Develop a strategy for distribution of the follow-up recommendations to key community and elected leaders, to the public libraries, and to the project web site.