

Communicating the Value of Preservation

A Playbook

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From parcel trucks delivering online orders to urban subways connecting workers with their jobs, transportation is an anchor for economic prosperity and quality of life. Yet aging system elements—whether highway or transit assets—are buckling under levels of use unforeseen by the engineers and planners who built them decades ago. Moreover, study after study shows a multibillion-dollar gap in infrastructure investments.

Despite frequent warnings, elected officials and the public remain unconvinced about the need to make improvements in the transportation infrastructure. Why? Part of the answer may be the inability of transportation professionals to communicate effectively about the importance of infrastructure investment. To convince decision makers, transportation practitioners must start delivering their message more clearly.

A transportation planner or an engineer should not dismiss communication as someone else's job. Communication can advance plans for sustaining and improving America's infrastructure by creating effective, memorable messages.

A recently completed National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) project developed guidance for officials at state departments of transportation (DOTs) and other agencies to develop and

A sinkhole in downtown Washington, D.C., resulted in road closures. Successful communication can convince decision makers of the importance of investing in transportation infrastructure.



Transportation agencies can craft messages about preservation and can deploy message delivery methods targeting audiences and stakeholders.

implement strategies for communicating the role and importance of maintenance and asset preservation in sustaining highway system performance. The findings are summarized in NCHRP Report 742, *Communicating the Value of Preservation: A Playbook*. The three basic steps are presented below.

1. Identify audiences.

A good place for transportation agencies to begin a communication effort is by getting to know the audience for their preservation messages. Infrastructure professionals should ask: "What does my audience value, what will make them trust my message, and what do I want them to do?"

Audience identification seeks to satisfy key stakeholders according to their definition of what is valuable; this is important to a proposal's success. If stakeholders are not satisfied, something will change, whether budgets, priorities, or staffing.

To get started with audience identification, conduct a brainstorm session about potential audiences with a cross section of internal staff to consider audience characteristics that may affect communication about preservation and maintenance. After assembling a list of audiences, discuss the interests, values,

and emotions that drive the support of maintenance and preservation in each group, in interrelated segments or clusters, and all together. Audience segments may include elected officials, industries that depend on reliable infrastructure, and advocacy groups.

With the list of audience segments, map out the stakeholders on an interest–influence matrix that characterizes interest level in preservation along one axis and power and influence over preservation issues along the other axis. The completed matrix will provide a graphic representation of audience clusters that support, oppose, or are indifferent to preservation issues and will enable identification of four distinct groups: promoters, defenders, latents, and apathetics (see Figure 1, right).

The interest–influence matrix, which maps audience segments according to their level of interest in preservation and their ability to influence outcomes, helps focus attention on how to move each audience segment into the top right corner of the matrix—indicating medium or high interest–high influence— and how to keep them there.

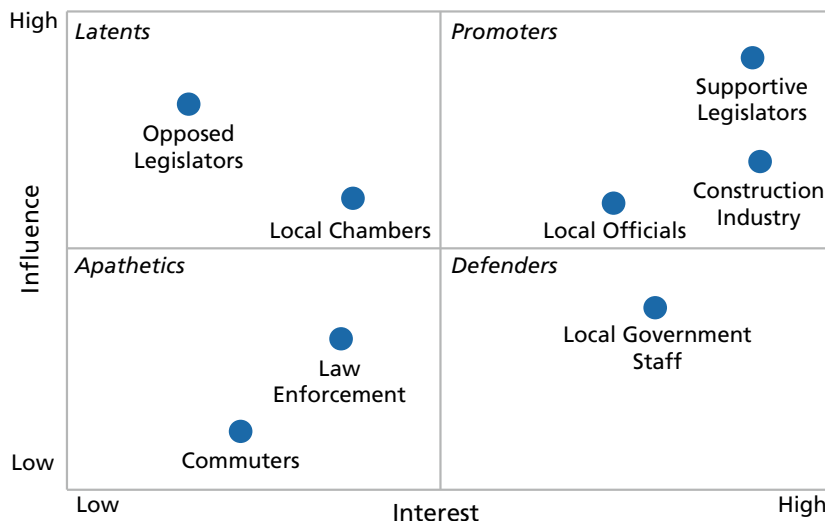
These stakeholders already are supportive but need to be buttressed with resources and information; moreover, they share sufficient interests to form a support coalition. This group can be the basis for developing an ongoing coalition of support for maintenance and preservation.

2. Design the messages.

Audience identification leads naturally into message design. Engineers and other transportation professionals often resist efforts to craft messages, preferring more technical conversations. Effective messages about preservation should have a strong analytical foundation but must be succinct and must resonate with their audience on an emotional level to compete in a world crammed with messages.

When crafting a message, tap the technical expertise, data sets, and analyses that the transportation agency possesses; take advantage of expertise that is well established in the arena of infrastructure preservation. Create concise and compelling messages that not only deliver powerful facts clearly but also appeal to the emotions and interests of audience segments and work in multiple delivery channels (see Figure 2, right).

◆ Use data about system attributes. Facts about the size and scope of transportation infrastructure can give a sense of its scale and importance. Identifying the age of a system or its elements can convey its historical significance and the sense of urgency to protect critical infrastructure investments.



◆ Use data about the system’s condition. Measures of asset condition, remaining service life, and many other attributes of a system’s condition can help communicate how the condition relates to customer expectations, how the condition has improved or declined, and the scale of the preservation task at hand.

◆ Use the system’s economic value. Conveying how the infrastructure system provides economic value to communities is increasingly important for public agencies. By conveying a sense of the importance of system elements, this information infers the importance of preservation.

FIGURE 1 Audience interest–influence matrix helps focus communications on target audiences.



FIGURE 2 Sample state DOT website to support and promote preservation, offering **1** links to social media; **2** blog posts by state DOT professionals and supporters of the preservation initiative; **3** a link to news directly related to the initiative and to other preservation information from around the country; and **4** a one-stop shop for materials and news related to the effort, allowing the state DOT to communicate with citizens and stakeholders in an inexpensive way.



FIGURE 3 Sample message to engage audiences and offer a positive call to action.

Raw data, even translated into a simple and clear message, rarely resonate. Present the information in ways that surprise the audience and catch attention (see Figure 3, left). The best messages do not rely entirely on numbers; instead they build on data to tell a story that resonates with audiences personally and emotionally. Facts and logic alone are not sufficient to move key audience segments to action.

Observe some basic principles for effective messages:

- ◆ **Be relevant.** Audiences should relate to the message; they should instinctively agree with the premise and feel that the message is directed to them and applies to them.

- ◆ **Be engaging.** Messages should draw the attention and interest of the audience—or risk being ignored and forgotten.

- ◆ **Stay positive.** A negative message that criticizes or that evokes fears can turn off an audience; aim to inspire instead.

- ◆ **Offer a call to action.** The message should inspire the audience to do something or to feel a certain way.

3. Deliver the message via multiple channels.

No matter how clever and memorable a preservation message is, without the right delivery tactics, the message will not reach the audience at the right time and motivate them to action. The volume of messages Americans receive each waking hour continues to skyrocket, and sending preservation messages on autopilot will not gain attention. For a message to be heard and remembered requires building a “surround sound” presence that establishes a constant drum-beat across multiple delivery channels from face-to-face conversations, speaking engagements, press articles, and editorial opinions to blog entries, social media conversations, and websites.

- ◆ **Direct contact.** Direct audience contacts are easy to implement, low in cost, and contribute to successful message delivery about preservation; direct contacts range from formal speaking engagements to open dialogue sessions or invitation-only meetings. With regular use, direct audience contact is a powerful delivery tool, because no filter comes between the speaker and the audience, the message can be explained in depth, and feedback on effectiveness is immediate.

- ◆ **Traditional media.** Traditional media strategies range from printed factsheets and brochures to media events designed to land stories in newspapers and on radio, television, and cable programs. Tradi-



PHOTO: NORTH CAROLINA DOT

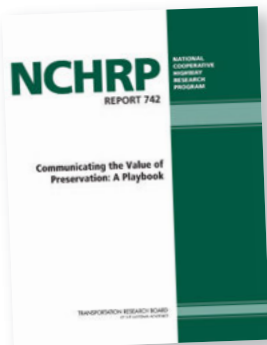
On a local television program, North Carolina DOT Secretary Tony Tata discusses Fortify, a project to rebuild two major highways in the Raleigh area.

tional media remain a core delivery method for messages. Through their recognizable and credible branding, newspapers and television stations confer status on a message. In addition, the traditional media often feed the new media, such as blogs.

- ◆ **New media.** New media channels, commonly defined as Internet-based, have evolved in the past decade from e-mails and modest websites into an extensive and sophisticated portfolio of information channels, including blogs, YouTube, podcasts, Twitter, Facebook, and other electronic tools. New media tools offer a low-cost alternative to traditional media; moreover, DOTs can enter into two-way conversations with their stakeholders that can strengthen connections. New media can convey visual or narrative messages and can support dissemination of detailed technical information.

Message delivery options come in many shapes and sizes. Use all or many to create a surround-sound campaign that gets messages heard, seen, and remembered via traditional media, on the Internet, and in face-to-face settings. Some versions of the message may be delivered visually through photographs, video, or charts and graphs; verbal versions may appear as newspaper op-eds or as presentations from agency leaders; yet other versions may combine visuals and words in blog posts or brochures. Catchy slogans delivered via a website, in e-mails, or on slides will resonate with high-impact, high-interest audiences and can enhance more detailed deliveries via a full presentation at a stakeholder forum or on the agency’s website.

For more ideas and guidance about communicating preservation needs, see NCHRP Report 742, *Communicating the Value of Preservation: A Playbook*, which is available online at www.trb.org/main/blurbs/168322.aspx.



For more information on NCHRP Report 742, visit www.trb.org/Publications/Blurbs/168322.aspx.