

Introduction

This tool-kit provides guide posts for talking in public about our community development work. It includes a working definition of our field, a framing document for setting the terms of public discussion, tips for target audiences, do's and don'ts for using mobilizing, inclusive language, and a webinar presentation by ActionMedia describing how to use these tools.

We can increase the power and clarity of our language, and make all our communications more effective. The challenge is to tell our story so well, that our listener is able to – and might want to – tell the same story to someone else.

That means our story can't be about *us*; it has to be about the listener. NACEDA's members and the organizations they represent have to see themselves from the outside, as part of the economic and civic life of their communities, to tell stories that resonate with their audiences – because “from the outside” is how all our audiences see us.

“What is community development?”

Development means finding opportunity to increase the value of our land and places.

Community development is the work of increasing the value of our neighborhoods, towns and cities for those who live and work there. Community development work is done by engaged members of the community – residents and neighbors, employers and employees, private and public property owners, and private and public institutions of every kind. Community development means people making decisions about, and making investments in, their block, town or region, to build opportunity for people to prosper.

Community development associations are non-profit businesses that are used by the people who are working to improve and develop their communities. Across the US, they provide the expertise, experience, and practical tools that get this work done.

Setting the Terms

Setting the terms of public discussion means building communications from a simple perspective, or frame, based in values, assumptions and relationships that are widely shared by our audiences. This is a challenge – to look at our work and our organizations from different perspectives, and then to internalize those perspectives: make them *our own* operating assumptions. Once we do this, we can create an infinite range of communications and messages that reinforce each other, and frame the issues in ways that support our objectives.

We build the frame for our messages about economic development on a foundation of core values: Opportunity, Prosperity, Security, Connection, Participation, Fairness.

We apply these values to two key perspectives, or contexts, for telling our stories:

Development is driven by opportunity.

Community development is like private development. Both depend on identifying places where there is opportunity to increase assets and property value, applying capital to build and improve those places, and creating on-going economic activity. Communities are working to develop their existing assets and attract new assets. As they succeed, the people who live and work there will have more access to opportunity to increase their own wealth and contribute to the well-being of the community as a whole.

Private developers assess opportunities in terms of *their own risks* and rewards.

Community developers assess opportunities in

**“Brick by brick, rail by rail,
calloused hand by calloused
hand, people kept dreaming, and
building, and working.”**

Barack Obama, June 2005.

This rhetorical construction is very powerful, and should be imitated and re-used, because it vividly conveys two key ideas. “Brick” and “hand” immediately evoke the individual worker (not government, business, or non-profit institution) as the agent of change. And it emphasizes our shared aspirations. “Dreaming” precedes building, and building leads to working, that is, to increased economic activity and opportunity. Describe our work in terms of these perspectives, and tell stories that illustrate them.

terms of the *public's* risk and reward. The purpose of our organizations is economic progress. We help focus public and private investment on improving the places where people live, work and visit. New and expanded businesses, better places to live, safer and more appealing streets and buildings, transportation and access to jobs, schools, and recreational sites -- these are among the tangible results of successful community development.

Our work is driven by aspirations.

Position the work of our organizations as *the means* that communities use to meet their aspirations. In {this town and that town and the other town – each in a different geography and with different demographics}, people are working toward the same goals: to make sure their kids can get a good education; to have a safe, stable place to live; to clean up the streets and clean the air so that they can enjoy their neighborhoods in good health; to find jobs, to keep their jobs local, and to have a chance at a better job...

Always put the people of the community, the residents, business owners, civic organizations and other institutions, in first place, as agents acting on behalf of their own actual (and named) aspirations to improve their lives and surroundings. Rewrite current communications and constructions that depict neighborhoods and their populations as passive recipients of our services. Depict the people who live, work, and operate businesses anywhere as the active leaders in building new homes and businesses, increasing aesthetic and social assets, and developing new opportunities.

One simple way to do this is with intentional grammar: construct sentences that have citizens (and, whenever appropriate, specific, named citizens) as the *subject* of the sentence, not as the object. Describe our organizations as resources that citizens and neighborhood groups turn to for advice, access to capital or grants, and technical support.

We often describe our organizations as nonprofits that strategically redevelop economically depressed areas. We talk about our programs, a wide range of activities to enhance the lives of low-to moderate-income residents and stimulate local economies.



Instead, say this: Small business owners and residents in low to moderate-income neighborhoods work to redevelop their neighborhood and create jobs by using the resources of community economic development associations, such as access to investment capital, relationships with and knowledge of city government, experience in land use and design options, and training and support for increasing citizen engagement.

Every community, rich and poor, has unmet opportunity. Investments in older or disadvantaged neighborhoods may offer smaller or slower financial return, making them less attractive to private developers. Community developers specialize in putting opportunity to work. They help develop social resources by fostering broad public participation, engaging community members in planning and decision making on their own terms and in their shared interests.

Community development benefits the area as a whole – not just the immediate neighborhood. When a neglected or abandoned home on the block is fixed up, all the other properties on the block gain in value. In the same way, as neighborhoods improve, they become more attractive to new visitors, new residents, new businesses, new jobs, and to new relationships with surrounding areas. As a result, community development increases regional as well as local prosperity, and increases the region's economic competitiveness.

VALUES

Opportunity & Prosperity

Talk about current and near-term economic conditions, and talk about creating employment. Especially now, as the Great Recession drags on, it is vital to talk about individual opportunity in terms of the broad interest in creating jobs and increasing economic vitality.

To have a strong future, our city must have strong neighborhoods. In partnership with other public and private institutions, we engage in work that is vital to that core strength: increased housing and economic opportunities, and programs and services that sustain families and good jobs.

Security / Connection

Security and safety are always key values in the minds of our audiences in discussion of the built environment, and are closely linked to issues of race and poverty. Leading with the value of security, in any or several of its many meanings, helps inoculate against concerns not far from the surface of every listener's mind. These are very uncertain times: we can make decisions now that will increase the safety of our neighborhoods, the economic security of renters and home owners, and our ability to meet the challenges and opportunities ahead.

“We all do better when we all do better.” Senator Paul Wellstone

Instead of defining the field in terms of the interests of a narrow group of direct beneficiaries, talk about the opportunities we share, for shared benefit. Too often, increasing economic opportunity for individuals through community development is presented as though it were a zero-sum game. To “level the playing field” means flattening the high ground and using it to raise the low ground. This is implied in the term of “equity”, which does not mean the same as, and is not as effective as, “fairness” and “equal opportunity”. Economies don't stop at the town or neighborhood line – prosperity in a town or neighborhood contributes to the prosperity of its neighbors, just as dysfunction and failure in a town or neighborhood affects its neighbors. Wellstone and other effective leaders use inclusive, mobilizing stories that are based in shared values.



In the current economic crisis, the values associated with economic security are especially important. These include maintaining and increasing property value, market stability and predictability, and family stability. Security applies to issues of housing, transportation, education, services to the elderly and disabled, and all issues pertaining to the built environment.

For example, homelessness can be described this way: A family cannot resolve its most serious woes -- joblessness, a lack of education and training, poor mental or physical health, domestic violence or addiction -- from inside a car, a lean-to in the woods, a dirty motel room or even in a friend's or relative's home from where they eventually will be tossed. Stability and growth require security.

Security also applies to connection among people within a place. People who are isolated are, by definition, in a less secure and safe position than people who are connected to others. This work is not just a matter of putting up buildings. It's always about improving our communities to make them better places to live and work. Community development serves the aspirations that all people share: to have a safe, appealing, and successful place to lead their lives, raise a family, conduct their business, know the people around them, participate in the civic and cultural life of their communities.

Participation & Fairness

Because this work is driven by the aspirations of people in the communities we serve, evoking the important value of their participation should be an explicit or implicit part of every communication. Developing communities means increasing participation, not just by selected members of the community, but by all.

Democracy means that the public has meaningful participation in public decisions. Even voters -- let alone those too disaffected to engage in this minimal form of participation -- are skeptical that their participation is welcome or will actually make any difference in the outcome of many public decisions. But Americans believe in democratic participation, and no one can publicly refute this value. Voters believe that when public officials and private developers listen to the people whose lives will be affected by development decisions, better decisions are made. When groups of people are left out

of decision making about the use of public resources, America's core values are violated.

Community development is based on decisions and processes that benefit the community as a whole by including the interests of all. Community development organizations are the means by which foundations, local governments, citizen organizations and individuals can engage citizens in improving their physical surroundings, creating stronger local economies and improving opportunity for individuals living and working in those communities.

Like democratic participation, the value of **fairness** in public life is irrefutable. No one can publicly defend government decisions that are unfair. Fairness applies any time public resources are at stake. These resources include land, zoning and tax subsidies, but also importantly include the air and the water, the siting of transportation and other infrastructure, and the democratic resources of public officials and government.

Ask critical questions: Who is included, and who is left out, of the benefits resulting from this public investment? What is the return on investment to the taxpayers whose money is supporting this? Public investment should result in benefit to the community as a whole, not to a some to the exclusion of others. Too much of current policy provides access to opportunity, prosperity, and connection for only some members of our community – those who live in {the western and northern parts of town.} But if your zip code is {on the east or south side}, those same policies reduce your access to a job, a home, an education. Working together, we can change these policies, and put an end to unfair exclusion of people because of their race or economic status.

Be Strategic

Every communication, in any medium, should be conceived in terms of moving someone to action. While many of our communications appear to be aimed at many audiences – press releases, web site articles, brochures, etc. – they are most strategic if written for specific targeted audiences: the individuals who ultimately can take the actions desired.

This is most obvious when thinking of policy advocacy work. Many communications to members and allies are ultimately aimed at the legislators themselves. Broadly, such communications serve two strategic purposes: to demonstrate to the key legislators that these issues are in public discussion, under the terms of discussions that the advocates are setting; and to recruit constituents to act as strategic messengers, communicating to their representatives about the issue and how it affects the district.

Begin every communication by thinking through the answers to these questions:

- What do we want to have happen?
- Who can take that action?
- What story do they need to hear to take that action?
- Who should they hear it from?
- How can we deliver the message?

Among our most important target audiences are elected officials, funders, and community members. In every case, talk about **benefits** and **results** more than about needs and methods or programs. Tell stories that are about your audience and their interests, not about your organization and its interests.

Elected Officials

Emphasize return on investment, and the successful track record of our organizations in leveraging public funds to spur private (including philanthropic) investment. Use multipliers and specific examples familiar to the individuals targeted, to illustrate the



economic effects of strategic public investment. This should be measured in terms of job creation, and in terms of effect on property values and tax base.

Every communication to elected officials at any level of government should be built around a story that features that office holder as the main character – preferably, as a hero, a leader whose actions will be appreciated by his or her constituents.

In an unfriendly political environment, it is more important than ever to lead with widely shared and irrefutable values of prosperity, security, participation and fairness. Look for statements from the target audience that can be interpreted to mean they agree with you about these values, and build the case for specific initiatives from there. Publicly repeat statements made by the target audience as widely and as often as possible. For example, use all available media (including social networks) to say “Senator Y showed he understands the importance of job creation, when he said “this.” That’s why his constituents expect to see his strong support for {initiative.}”

Don’t neglect your allies – quote them widely. And, when dealing with representatives ideologically opposed to your initiatives, quote them in their opposition, and ask them to explain themselves in terms of participation (“Is she listening to the people who live here, or ignoring them?”) and in terms of fairness (“Who is included in the benefits of the bill she supports, and who is left out?”)

Always recruit constituents as messengers. Include the front line beneficiaries, but make sure to include others – business owners, residents of near-by neighborhoods or communities, elders, major employers, financial experts, realtors, construction workers, etc. Recruiting these individuals of course includes getting them to write a letter for publication, make a phone call, and otherwise speak out directly. But you can also recruit them by asking them their view on narrow questions (e.g., is there opportunity for revitalizing this neighborhood? What would it take?), clarifying that you want to publish their comments, and then quoting them repeatedly in communications aimed at the legislative targets.

Funders

With both philanthropic and corporate funders, it is vital to establish the two key perspectives of our work: that it is driven by opportunity, as opposed to being driven by need; and that it is an outgrowth of people's aspirations to improve their lives and communities. Community development is proven as the best way to leverage scarce public and private dollars to achieve maximum impact on the lives of residents in low-income urban neighborhoods. In the process, it lessens social and economic disparities and creates vital new markets for the region's economy.

Community economic development associations fill a critical gap in the region by working on projects in areas that private developers find too risky. They establish a solid development foothold that will attract private developers into the area.

NACEDA member associations, and NACEDA itself, should be positioned as a crucial mechanism for getting the most out of the substantial investment that has already been made in individual community and economic development associations. By sharing experience and resources, and increasing the capacity of its members, the association is a crucial, cost-effective means to strengthen the work in all parts of the state or nation. Through the Association, the individual skills, experiences and approaches of our members and the communities they work with are shared with their peers. And our combined objectives are forged into a unified, effective, persistent voice for the residents of rural, urban and suburban communities across the state.

Community Members

The strength of communications from the national and state associations depends to a large degree on the communications from local organizations, which in turn depend on the degree to which those organizations are in communication with the people in the areas they serve – not only participants or residents in the programs they run, but with the neighbors, businesses, other civic leaders, and other organizations and institutions. Because public participation is so central to the mission and operation of these organizations, it is essential that they are seen to be listening organizations.

For this reason, the individual organizations should strive as much as possible to “step away from the microphone” when engaging community members. They should engage



in strategic, systematic listening, in individual interviews as well as group meetings, and with community leaders outside of the already existing circle of people familiar with the organization. As this intentional listening continues, our members will be in a position to equip other members of the community to speak about the work of neighborhood redevelopment. Citizens, importantly including secondary or indirect beneficiaries of the work, should be quoted widely in talking about how the neighborhood has improved, and could improve further, through available and potential resources and professional support.

These statements should be an active archive, and widely shared, forming a communications bank of the state associations, embodying the perspectives of aspiration and the value of participation, by letting people speak for themselves.

Website Check list

- Home Page is **clean and uncluttered**.
- Home Page **prominently features statement of purpose** (NOTE: this need not be the organization's formal Mission Statement. The purpose of the organization can be re-stated in numerous ways, all of which should emphasize the key perspectives and values. See animated top banner at <http://oregonon.org/>)
- Visuals feature people**, not just buildings.
- Simple method (preferably with map) to find a CDC.**
- Features one or more CDC's in the news.**
- Prominently includes descriptions** of and links to partner and allied organizations, and puts the communities first, reflecting the perspective that the CDC's are implements of the aspirations of citizens.
- Populated with real people**, whose pictures and words reflect the benefits that result from the work. (See <http://hcdnj.wordpress.com/> for a vivid example of what can be done through systematic listening.) Includes individuals who are indirect beneficiaries, not program participants.
- Targeted to decision makers.** Key legislators, corporations, neighborhood institutions, or other strategic targets of the organization should find themselves, or find people they care about, on the website. This may take the form of quoting them on some shared interest; or quoting citizens who are not direct beneficiaries of CDC programs but who are strategic messengers to these targets. The web site should always include examples of people talking, in public, about the issues the CDCs and their Association are engaged in.
- Current.** As implied by including material targeted to decision makers, the content of the web site has to change fairly often. Take down out of date material, and use the web site as a strategic tool.

