





# FOUR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION STEPS for Real Results

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*Article developed from real-time session insights captured by Sightsight*

**T**oo often, organizations jump straight to tactics—requesting a social post, media pitch, or email blast—without first defining who they need to reach or what they want to change. At MSAE25, *Four Strategic Communication Steps for Real Results* challenged that reactive approach. Andie Poole, APR, shared how a disciplined framework can help associations move from activity-driven communication to outcome-driven strategy.

Drawing on Bellwether Public Relations’ work with nonprofits, universities, and state agencies across Michigan, Poole introduced the RACE framework: **Research, Action Plan, Communicate, and Evaluate**. Rather than a linear checklist, RACE functions as a continuous improvement cycle—one that ensures every communication effort is grounded in insight, aligned to goals, and measured for impact.

“Strategy has to come before tactics—or you risk wasting time, money, and trust.”

## Research: Preventing Costly Assumptions

Effective communication begins with understanding what audiences actually believe—not what organizations assume they believe. Poole emphasized that research does not have to be complex or expensive; interviews, surveys, polling, and analytics can all provide valuable insight when used intentionally.

One case study illustrated this point clearly. A campaign led by the Michigan Library Association addressed increasing challenges related to book access and censorship. Research revealed strong bipartisan support for protecting access to books, with parents emerging as the most engaged audience. That data shaped both the campaign’s tone and its choice of messengers—preventing missteps and strengthening credibility from the start.

## Action Planning: Defining the Change You Want to See

With research in hand, Poole stressed the importance of clarity before execution. An effective action plan defines the specific outcome the organization wants to influence—whether awareness, attitudes, or behaviors—and identifies the audiences and channels most likely to drive that change.

This step is where many organizations struggle. Without a clear objective, even well-produced communications can fail to move the needle. By grounding planning decisions in research, associations can focus resources where they matter most and avoid spreading efforts too thin.

## Communicate: Integrating Channels for Greater Impact

Successful campaigns rarely rely on a single channel. Poole highlighted the importance of integrating **earned, paid, and owned media**, allowing each to reinforce the others. Search engine optimization, influencer partnerships, social listening, and traditional media all play a role when aligned to a shared strategy.

Another case study—the I Vaccinate campaign, a partnership between the Frannie Strong Foundation and Michigan Department of Health and Human Services—demonstrated how messenger choice can be just as important as message content. Research showed widespread distrust of institutions, prompting a parent-to-parent communication approach that emphasized empathy over authority. Coalition partners were equipped with toolkits to extend reach efficiently, helping the campaign navigate opposition while maintaining message consistency.

## Evaluate: Measuring What Actually Matters

Measurement, Poole noted, must go beyond outputs such as impressions or post counts. True evaluation focuses on outcomes—changes in awareness, attitudes, or behavior that align with strategic goals. Post-event surveys, geographic data, and trend analysis provide insight into what worked and what needs refinement.

In the case of I Vaccinate, evaluation revealed measurable increases in vaccination rates and national recognition, including a presentation to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These results reinforced the value of disciplined evaluation—not just for accountability, but for learning and improvement.

## From Framework to Ongoing Practice

Poole closed by reinforcing that RACE is not a one-time exercise. The strongest communication strategies evolve through repetition, reflection, and refinement. By returning to research, adjusting plans, integrating channels, and measuring results, organizations can adapt to real-world challenges while staying aligned with their mission and goals.

For association leaders navigating advocacy, membership, events, or public trust, the message was clear: strategic communication is not about doing more—it's about doing what matters, on purpose.

Interested in applying the RACE framework to your organization's communication challenges? Andie Poole, APR, can be reached at [apoole@bellwetherpr.com](mailto:apoole@bellwetherpr.com).



### Meet Andie

**ANDIE POOLE, APR**, is a partner at Bellwether Public Relations, where she helps mission-driven organizations use research-based strategy to communicate with clarity, credibility, and impact. She is passionate about aligning communication efforts with real-world outcomes that strengthen trust and advance organizational goals. Andie can be reached at [apoole@bellwetherpr.com](mailto:apoole@bellwetherpr.com).