

SHARED PRACTICE GUIDE 004 - COMMUNICATIONS

Rev 01

Introduction

Shared practice guides (SPG) are a vehicle to share knowledge between the u3as in the London area. They are created by collating knowledge and experiences from those u3as. They are only a guide – what worked for one u3a might not work for your u3a. If in your experience something is wrong or you disagree with something, please write in to allow an update to be created and published. It's hoped these Guides will grow over time with more shared experiences.

Scope

This particular SPG addresses the aspect of Communications. Communications is a vast subject, so this Guide will not be exhaustive.

There are two basic forms of communications -internal and external. Both are important in the efficient organisation of a u3a. External communications is largely about how the u3a communicates with outside organisations or people and includes publicity type communications. Internal communications is primarily about informing the u3as membership.

Background

Consideration needs to be given to what your mix of communication methods is going to be. How much is going to be 'push' (sent out to your members. Either by newsletters, bulletins, mailshots, emails) or 'pull' (left for members or the public to go and seek out the information. For example on your website).

The image of a u3a is often formed by the quality of its communications. For recruiting new members, a good professional looking website is one key communication too or informative, attractive, leaflets. But also for retaining members, internal communications need to be clear and regular as well.

Some u3as or Regions have a Public Relations Advisor. They lead on external communications but support for internal communications as well.

Learnings

This section describes what has previously been experienced by various u3as in the London region.

Consider conducting a survey of your members to see how often they use each of your communication methods, and what they think of your current methods. Appendix 3 has some sample questions.

Reference Material

There is some good information on this subject on The Third Age Trust's national website (under 'Advice') or you can access it here:

<https://www.u3a.org.uk/members-area/support/advice-and-guidance#communications>

Contact Point

Currently, there is no one who has offered to be a central contact point for any further explanation of the material in this Guide. In the meantime, queries can be sent to:

Webmaster.londonregionu3a@gmail.com

APPENDIX 1 – COMMUNICATIONS PLAN, EXAMPLE 1

This is an example of what a u3a created to ensure they understood what communication methods they were using. It then allowed them to consider if that was enough or if they had to do things differently

What We Currently Do:

TYPE	FREQUENCY	PURPOSE
Newsletters	6 monthly	A look back at what activities have taken place
Bulletins	fortnightly (approx.)	A look forward of what is up & coming
Direct emailing (to all)	ad hoc	For key things, e.g. AGM Some u3as use regular email shots to all their members; others avoid this.
Group emailing	ad hoc	To advise on specifics. To Interest Group members only.
Website.	live	Publicise u3a activities to public & members
Beacon	live	Specifics for members
Leaflets	ad hoc/libraries	Advertise the u3a
Facebook	Two posts per week	Publicise key events to Public
Instagram	ad hoc (monthly)	Publicise key events to Public
Open Day	annually	Publicise u3a to prospective new members
Local Newspaper Adverts	Once a year	To support Open Day

What Others Do:

Look at other u3as websites to pick up good ideas.

What Else Should We do?

APPENDIX 2 – COMMUNICATIONS PLAN, EXAMPLE 2

This is another example of what a u3a created to ensure they understood what communication methods they were using. It then allowed them to consider if that was enough or if they had to do things differently

CURRENT METHODS USED:

BULLETIN - issued fortnightly by email to all the membership; hard copy to those not on email (also available through the website). There is a 'Guideline' that defines style and content. Bulletin Editor produces based on material from other EC members. Content is 'looking forward', no historic content - also duplicates 'What's On' webpage.

NEWSLETTER - three issues (Winter, Spring, Summer) by email to all the membership; hard copy to those not on email (also available through the website). There is a template that defines style. Volunteers needed to produce. Content is generally looking back/historic reporting e.g. outings concluded, trips made, etc. Last one did start to slip into also carrying some look forward advertising. Material sourced from Group Coordinators & others.

WEBSITE - this is our public, outward looking, image. Communicates to the public all that our u3a offer. Since instigating the use of Beacon (Members System/Database) less forward-looking info displayed (e.g. where things are hosted). Partly this is because we don't want members of the public turning up at events without being an u3a member. Instead, now carries more historic information (i.e. visit reports). Supported by XXXXXX

BEACON - this is a Third Age Trust provided database system (introduced about ? years ago by demand). Used by about half (?) of u3as nationally & growing. Now supported by an external IT company. We use it extensively for membership records and group administration. We don't use its finance package (as too limited). We have encouraged Group Coordinators to support (i.e. use) it and members to use it. It carries information not available to the public through the website e.g. addresses for events, timing of events. In addition, it has other functionality for members (e.g. create personal schedule).

DIRECT (E)MAILING TO FULL MEMBERSHIP - generally not used by u3a (other than as transmittal of above); reserved for special requirements (e.g. seeking volunteers under the It Depends On Us initiative). Other u3as do seem to use this route more frequently - potentially deluging their members with emails.

MONTHLY MEEING - currently this is primarily a Monthly Talk. A few 'parish notes' are read out but 5 minutes worth max. Recently we have started using a noticeboard for communications. But we've only put up photographs - so what is the point, the intent of this? Other u3as have Monthly Meetings where many topics are discussed. Only some of these meetings are combined with a Monthly Talk.

LEAFLETS - hard copy leaflets are used at certain events and are placed in all local libraries. These show what we do and provide contact details for joining.

NOTICEBOARD - many other u3as (the ones with a permanent Centre) use noticeboards as a key method for publishing information to their membership. Difficult for us to replicate but could consider doing more at our monthly meeting.

MONTHLY MAIL SHOT TO ALL GROUP COORDINATORS – this email would address various issues or topics either directly relevant or for cascading to their group members (e.g. reminder that members should be offering 50p for coffee/tea to the Group Coordinator).

SOCIAL MEDIA - We did use Facebook but found that we weren't getting many followers and hence dropped it. No log now on the web pages

X – we do maintain an X account. XXXXXXXXX manages this and re-tweets (not sure what the verb for X is) things picked up from our webpages or Bulletins. XXXXX regularly reports to the EC with status.

Instagram – we do have an account. XXXXXX maintains this with posting images he receives from Group Coordinators. Frequency of posts various but is about 3 a month. We have only 13 followers currently and are following 28. Our followers are all our members or local organisations.

Next Door – we occasionally make a post on Next Door, e.g. to advertise the Open day.

Internal or External

No distinction is made in the above between 'external' and 'internal' communication methods.

Specific Forms of Communications Utilised for the Open Day

We use the following to advertise our Open Day:

Newspaper ads; local
Leaflet Handouts; Group Coordinators; Public Notice Boards: libraries; Private Notice Boards: Sainsbury's; House to house delivery/neighbours of members
Mail shot to all local Amenity Groups (over 50)
Council & Council publications

Advertising for Others

Currently we don't advertise for any other organisation. So, whether it's the Bulletin or the website, there is no space given to organisations that might be appealing for volunteers or highlighting a good cause.

However, if it's for another sister u3a then this is allowed.

APPENDIX 3 – COMMUNICATIONS SURVEY

Sample questions that could be included in a survey of a u3as members:

How frequently do you make use of the following communication methods to receive information about your u3a activities?

1. I use the u3a website to see general information:

Select only one.

regularly sometimes never

2. I use the u3a website pages for the groups I am in:

Select only one.

regularly sometimes never

3. I read the u3a Newsletters:

Select only one.

every issue sometimes never

4. I read the u3a Bulletins

Select only one.

every issue sometimes never

5. I would like to receive email News cascades:

Select only one.

Once a month once a week only if there is something specific