

American Fisheries Society is searching for a firm to dive into AFS communications planning: AFS today issued a RFP to develop a Strategic Communications Plan. The product of this effort will help us in a variety of ways to enhance, target, and better construct our many communications tools to better serve the existing membership, reach out to potential members, and provide information on fisheries issues to partners and key audiences. Proposals are due by 17 November 2014. Please contact Shawn Johnston for a copy of the RFP: [sjohnston@fisheries.org](mailto:sjohnston@fisheries.org).

As indicated in the content overview and task list below, the contractor will review related documents and interview an expanded group of individuals, including AFS members, staff, Governing Board and organizations that use AFS information to gain an understanding of the situation, desired outcomes and potential options. These 15-20 stakeholder interviews would include representatives that have a direct interest in the strategic communications development, delivery and outcomes, namely those who provide communications within AFS as well as those who use the information and products from AFS.

Examples of representatives of the audiences that use AFS products may include public relations specialists from agencies, nongovernmental organizations, congressional staffers or others. The internal stakeholders within AFS would be arrayed to reflect an intimate knowledge of AFS objectives, audiences and tools, historical approaches, current organizational policies and future opportunities might include representatives from the External Affairs Committee, Publications Overview Committee, Continuing Education, website and social media developers, an editor of an AFS technical journal, Membership Committee, Resource Policy Committee, Electronic Services Advisory Board and others. Both groups would represent diversity of the Society and its audiences.

The information gleaned from these interviews will provide a foundation for the contractor to understand the communications objectives and resources within the Society.

The communications plan is a living document that will include recommendations for the overseeing its implementation and ensuring periodic updates, as needed to maintain relevance to evolving objectives, audiences and tools.

#### Content of the Plan

The AFS Strategic Communications Plan would contain these sections. Questions and examples are provided to illustrate the type of information found in each section.

Discovery (Situation Analysis) – What is the need or situation? What specifically is AFS positioned to do better than any other organization? What is the current status of communications approaches (i.e., audiences, messages, tools)? What organizational goals are not currently being reached because of a lack of or an inadequately focused communications approach?

The following questions are based on those posed in a letter specific to social media from President John Boreman appointing the chair of an AFS Special Committee for Scientific Communications.

These questions could formulate the background for a situation analysis.

- How are other professional societies strategically using communications tools?
- How are individual AFS subunits using tools to connect to their members? Is this a method that can be promoted to better serve subunit membership?
- Are there any standards that are needed among the subunits when designing their websites, Facebook pages, running a LinkedIn group or twitter account, etc.?
- Would it be useful for subunits to have a how-to guide on setting up and using various tools?
- How can AFS use tools to support communication and connect among its members?
- How can AFS use tools to attract fisheries professionals?
- How can AFS use tools to increase awareness on larger environmental issues?
- How can AFS effectively use tools to connect with anglers, other aquatic resource users, and other conservationists?
- How can AFS take a more active role in training new fisheries professionals to be more effective communicators?
- What are the best methods/tools to evaluate AFS success/shortcomings online and through other communications formats?

AFS is a member-driven organization and periodically conducts surveys with members to determine desired direction and outcomes for Society activities. Several of these surveys contain key information that would inform development of the AFS Strategic Communications Plan.

Objectives – What does AFS want to accomplish through focused communications? How would a more focused communications approach support these organizational goals? What do we need specific internal and external audiences to know (awareness), feel (acceptance), or do (action)?

Examples (organizational goals followed by related communications objectives):

- 1) Encourage comprehensive education for fisheries professionals.
  - a) Are aware of educational opportunities provided by AFS (know).
  - b) Recognize educational opportunities as worthwhile (feel).
  - c) Attend pertinent educational opportunities provided by AFS (do).
  - d) Historical knowledge is respected, retained and transmitted to next generation (feel / do).
- 2) Publish leading fisheries research.
  - a) Authors choose to publish influential and cutting edge scientific advancements with AFS (feel / do).
  - b) AFS takes advantage of available media communications technology to share scientific information being generated by our members and others (do).
- 3) Promote use of scientific research in sustainable management of fisheries resources.
  - a) Research results are visible, accessible, respected, useful (know / feel).
  - b) Results influence public perception of fisheries issues (know / feel).
  - c) Results influence policies (know / feel / do).
- 4) Host scientific meetings and other communications tools where new results are reported and discussed.
  - a) A growing, active membership is aware of scientific results provided by AFS (know).

- b) Science and presentation are high quality, respectable, valuable (feel).
- c) Implications of emerging and controversial issues are discussed (do).
- d) Volunteers serve in leadership positions (feel / do).
- e) Members are skilled in and participate in effective information exchange (know / feel / do).
- f) Organizational procedures are consistently applied between units and across leadership transitions (know / do).

Target Audiences – Who are these primary audiences? Identify key sectors as specifically as possible (not just “the public” or “students”) and prioritize audiences, as needed.

Examples (associated with numbered objectives above):

- 1) a-c) High school students, undergraduate and graduate students, young professionals, established practitioners, potential members, past members, educators. Page | 4
- d) Students, members, retirees
- 2) Researchers, authors
- 3) a-c) Resource managers, policy makers, resource users, media, partners and other organizations that use AFS information to influence research, policies, procedures, etc.
- 4) a-c) Future AFS members, past members, and current members including sectors such as undergraduate and graduate students, young professionals, mid-career practitioners, retired practitioners, under-represented groups, and other organizations, including media and specific sectors of the public concerned with natural resources.
- d-e) Leaders of units and student subunits.

Messages – What do each of these target audiences need to hear to be responsive?

Examples (associated with numbered objectives above):

- 1) Provides opportunities to explore fisheries careers. Continuing education offerings of AFS meet the requirements of employers. Retirees contribute valuable perspective for long-term effective resource management. Established professionals convey strategies for success to young professionals. Publish tables of contents from sister society journals on the Society website.
  - 2) Influential and cutting edge research results are published by AFS. Authors and readers are assured of thorough, timely and fair peer review, careful editing, and a quality final product. Books present up-to-date or comprehensive information.
  - 3) Implications of research for management actions are clearly presented. Implications of research for sustainable use and value of resources are presented. Implications of research for decision making are presented.
  - 4) Controversial issues are handled in a timely and fair fashion. Member-driven information exchange is conducted in skilled and professional manner. Professional diversity (all facets) is encouraged and valued.
- Fisheries professionals belong to a community with a long history that is networked, respects and

values each other. Members have access to valuable information not available to non-members. Members enjoy special savings (event registration, books). Leadership is nurtured and recognized. Member personal data and contact information is protected, as appropriate. Society business is conducted in an organized and professional fashion.

Tools – What media or processes are best suited to communicating the specified messages to these target audiences? Where do they get information? What format(s) do they prefer? How can these messages be positioned to elicit the desired response?

Examples (associated with numbered objectives above):

1) Continuing education programs at events and online

Certification

Job listing

Student events at meetings

Social media

Hutton program

2) Journals

Books

Databases

Conferences (annual meeting, symposia)Page | 5

3) Plenary sessions

Fisheries

Website

Resource policies, position statements & resolutions

Advocacy guidelines

Congressional visits and briefings

Press events/seminars

Contributions to allied organizations' publications (e.g., research highlights with advocacy implications)

4) eNewsletter – news, brief communications,

Email blasts

Blogs: Fishionary (definitions)

Annual meetings and special symposia

Awards

Shop AFS

Social media

Members-only portal

GB meeting minutes, unit reports, strategic plan, constitution and procedures

Strategic approach – What is the best way to go about using those media/processes? What principles, policies or guidance ensure appropriate implementation?

Examples (may be overall guidelines or associated with particular objectives):

- Guiding principles: prominence, visibility, accessibility, equity, utility, respectability, value of membership, high return on investment?
- What are the goals of our communications policy?
- How will we update our policy and reinforce it?
- What information about AFS can employees share?
- Where will AFS maintain a presence (print, online, in person)?
- How and by whom will AFS monitor conversations about our brand?
- How will AFS maintain a consistent social tone and style across these networks?
- How will AFS encourage employees to participate as representatives of our brand?
- How and who will respond to individuals who communicate with AFS?
- Who is authorized to proactively post on behalf of AFS? Does this authorization account for different regions and teams?
- What constitutes a communications “situation” for AFS? What is our process for handling a post that could be categorized as serious misconduct?
- Are there any conditions or limits for use of the AFS logo by AFS members or others?
- How will AFS deal with negative comments online?
- What are the best practices for use of photos, journal reprints, articles (copyright, credits, etc)?

A communications plan implements Society objectives. It does not determine them. As a strategic approach, the plan will work within existing AFS goals, objectives, communications policies and procedures. However, the project may result in recommendations for modifying these guiding principles to better serve AFS objectives.

Actions – Implementation Table and Assignments describing who will do what, when, where, how, resources, timeline, including recommendations on oversight of plan implementation and updating the communications plan as needed.

Budget – What is it going to cost? What is the priority if resources are not adequate? Who determines how resources are allocated?

Evaluation – How will AFS measure whether each approach was effective in achieving objectives and what is not working as intended? NOTE: This is very critical to improving the return on investment, but is often overlooked as an integral component of the communications process.

Examples of metrics (associated with numbered objectives above):

- 1) New and current employees are prepared with skills and knowledge (employer survey).
- 2) Impact factor and other measures for all print publications.
- 3) Use of products to influence management policies and actions (agency administrator or congressional staff survey).
- 4) Perception of community belonging (audience segments). Revenue generated by print publications and events (financial contribution). Involvement of leaders (nominations in unit elections).

## Tasks

As outlined in this Statement of Work (SOW), project activities would include:

- 1) Initial information gathering, including review of pertinent member surveys on several related topics, and a conference call with AFS Communications Special Committee. Review related documents, such as member surveys, guidelines and policies.
- 2) Provide a template for a Communications Plan (outline components for outreach and engagement, similar to the above but may be modified through consultation with Team).
- 3) Scoping phone interviews with 15-20 influential stakeholders, including member and nonmember individuals with key knowledge of audiences and tools, historical approaches, current organizational policies and desired outcomes of the AFS membership, as identified in consultation with the AFS Communications Special Committee, AFS Officers, and Management Committee.
- 4) Confer with AFS Communications Special Committee to discuss results of stakeholder interviews and implications for developing an effective communications strategy.
- 5) Prepare a Strategic Communications Plan that identifies the current and desired status of communications, describes how the AFS members and staff can engage focused, strategic use of tools, and provides guidance for communication with members and key constituents on behalf of AFS.

## Deliverables:

- Conference calls with AFS Communications Special Committee and Governing Board (4 calls – feedback on project design, interview results, draft plan, final plan)
- Outline/Template for a Communications Plan (in electronic MS Word format)
- Stakeholder interview summary (in electronic MS Word format)
- Present and lead discussion of draft plan at AFS Governing Board meeting (in person on February 2, Savannah, GA)
- Prepare draft and final Strategic Communications Plan (in electronic MS Word format)

## Assumptions:

- AFS Communications Special Committee to provide all available background materials, including descriptions of current and desired tools, policies, internal and external constituents.
- AFS Communications Special Committee to provide contact data in useable format for contractor to conduct phone interviews with selected members and staff.
- AFS to be responsible for all logistical, facilities, A/V, and meeting supplies for calls and meetings.
- AFS to reimburse contractor for cost of attendance at one meeting to present and discuss draft results.
- All documents to be prepared and delivered in MS Word electronic format. AFS to be responsible for the printing of any products, handouts, or background materials.

## Timeline

With the goal of having the process completed by August 15, 2015, the potential timeline for this effort is:

- Early Dec: Conference call #1 with Team (project design)
- Early-January: Conduct 15-20 stakeholder interviews, template for communications plan completed by January 15
- Mid-January: Send summary report of comments from stakeholders to Governing Board at least one week before the in person meeting
- Feb 2: Contractor presents the process, reviews stakeholder results and obtains input from Governing Board on communications strategies and tactics (in person, Savannah, GA)
- March 1: Complete report on input from stakeholders and Governing Board
- Mid-March: Conference call #2 with Team (review interview results)
- April 1: Draft communications plan
- Mid-May: Presentation and discussion of draft plan with Governing Board via email and webex.
- June 1: Complete draft Strategic Communications Plan for member review
- Mid-June: Conference call #3 with Team (discuss plan implementation)
- July 1: Publish draft Strategic Communications Plan for 30-day member review
- Mid-August: Revise plan with comments.
- Aug 15: AFS Communications Committee presents final version to Governing Board (in person retreat, Portland, OR)