

COMMUNICATIONS

Category: Communications

1 Purpose

To support u3as to maximise the effectiveness of their internal and external communications.

2. The benefits of good communications

The continued success of the u3a movement as a whole and the health and wellbeing of every individual u3a depends, in part, on good communications. This includes internal communications with members and external to the wider community. Clear, consistent messages, put out across as many of its platforms as possible will mean that you are reaching the largest target audience. An integrated, joined-up communications strategy ensures that the reputation and profile of the u3a movement continues to grow and thrive. How does communications differ from marketing? Marketing is the business of promoting and selling products or services, including market research and advertising. Communications is the sourcing and exchanging of information or news to create a connection between people. Communications and marketing are strongest when applied together.

Communications work best when internal and external communications work together. Your members are your greatest asset and can be the best ambassadors for the u3a movement. Good internal communications means that your members feel confident to go out and deliver u3a messages to the wider community.

3. External communications and public relations (PR)

Raising the profile of your u3a, and the movement as a whole will help grow the charity and ensure it remains sustainable and robust for the future. Using a variety of communication tools will not only help reach out to new communities and potential members but will help put the u3a on the agenda of policy makers and influencers. This is about promoting our 'brand' and messages of the benefits of lifelong learning and staying active in the third stage of life.

4. Your Audience

4.1 How do you establish your audience?

Be clear about the audience that you are trying to reach as this will help to shape and target your messages. Your audience will include your members and potential members as well as external organisations. You need to think about who you currently reach and

who you want to reach. Are there particular sections of the community who are not represented within your u3a? How could you reach out to them?

4.2 How to connect with your audience

A good way to connect is through telling a story that people can relate to and that feeds into a larger conversation. The skill is to find interesting and sometimes unusual stories which connect with the audience and illustrate clearly what the u3a movement is all about. The aim is to create interesting and engaging content which can be used on all your platforms.

5. Platforms and techniques

5.1 Website

This should be one of your strongest communications platforms. The u3a website is the showcase for your organisation and needs to be informative and interesting. It will also set the tone of what the u3a stands for, does and offers. Other platforms that you use to communicate should drive traffic back onto your website where you should have clear 'call to action' messages about how to join and become part of the u3a movement.

Remember that your website is a front facing, public site. Whilst you want it to be informative, be careful not to post any information that you would not want in the public domain. Your website should reflect the vibrancy of the organisation to those who may not have come across it before.

The website needs to be kept up to date. Let members know where to send information they would like published. If you do not have a website yet, have a look at the u3a siteworks website: <https://siteworks.u3a.org.uk/>

Remember: Your website is your shop window - it is probably the first place many people look if they want to find out more about your u3a. Ask members for feedback about your website. Take a look at other u3a websites for ideas and inspiration.

5.2 Digital and social media

Social media is one of the fastest growing industries and millions of people are having conversations, promoting their messages and talking to each other using social media. To use platforms properly you need to invest the time and effort to engage people, so consider whether you have the time and resources to do it properly. This is especially true of those allocated to administer and edit the account. Increasing numbers of u3as are using social media platforms such as Facebook to promote themselves. Often the mainstream media and journalists will look to social media to pick up stories so it can be a good way of widening the u3a profile and advertising what you are doing.

The Third Age Trust currently uses Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube. YouTube is the world's second-largest search engine. You can shoot a video and make it easy to find by naming and tagging it. There are currently new videos promoting u3a being put on the Third Age Trust YouTube channel for use by u3as across the UK.

If you are thinking of setting up a Facebook page for your u3a there is good advice available at: <https://www.facebook.com/help/104002523024878/>.

It is a very good idea to provide a set of guidelines on using social media for your stakeholders – including internal sites such as a closed Facebook page. This means everyone knows standards of behaviour expected of them when using the site.

Remember: the use of social media is becoming increasingly widespread and the u3a needs to consider as to how it could help in relation to the communications that you wish to achieve.

6. Media and the press

Local and regional media is a very good way to get your message out into the community. People are more likely to read and engage with their local papers and freesheets than read a national. Some u3as have found their local radio or television stations have provided a very good way to promote events and their u3a generally.

Placing articles in free news sheets and community publications (such as the local borough council) can be very effective too. Some areas in the country are increasingly seeing smaller, crowd-funded publications spring up which are specifically targeted at a postcode area. These micro publications have a very targeted audience and often a large reach, delivered through every door in that location.

Writing letters to publications can also highlight your u3a - the letters pages are among the most read in many publications. Remember, if you mention u3a then you are representing the whole u3a movement so be mindful not to express controversial or extreme views.

It is a good idea to have a designated media contact on your u3a committee if possible but most of all, to have a spokesperson who can be quoted in the press. This could be the Chair or Secretary.

6.1 Media releases

If you have a story to tell your local media, the best approach is a media release. A media release is a condensed story and obeys the same rules as a news story (outlined below). With a few tweaks you can use the story on other platforms such as your website or social media channels. The task of a media release is to tell the story, as clearly, simply and straightforwardly as possible.

6.2 What makes a good news story?

Any story should try to contain at least one of the following angles:

- **Human** - a case study can make a story more relatable
- **New**
- **Surprising or unusual**
- **Interesting** - a story may be interesting to you but is it interesting to the target audience you are trying to reach?
- **Local** - a strong local angle can make it appeal to local media and freesheets

6.3 How to write a press release?

- Title
- Explain the story
- Expand on the story
- Quote from stakeholder
- Note to editors
- Boilerplate
- A call to action

Media releases deal with the present – what has just happened or is about to happen. Try and keep everything immediate and in the present tense. Use as few words as possible, telling the story tightly and economically.

- **Headline** – engaging and understandable.
- **Explaining the story** – try to achieve this, as much as possible, in the first sentence in an interesting way.
- **Expand on the story** - within the opening paragraph try to answer the key questions - who, what, when, where, why?
- **Quote** - include an engaging quote from someone relevant to the story (u3a Chair or a u3a member) who has given permission to be quoted.
- **Notes to editors** - not essential but can be useful if you want to put in things that you couldn't fit in the main story. For example more details on a particular venue or how an event came about.
- **Boilerplate** – this is PR jargon for a set piece of text which explains more about your organisation and can be added to the bottom of every release. The Third Age Trust boilerplate says: “- u3a is a national learning organisation for those no longer working full-time. Members connect together to develop their interests, make new friends and have fun. There are more than 1,000 u3as spread right across the UK, with interest groups run and chosen by the members. Whether it's French, flute or fashion, members can either join existing groups or start their own. For a modest annual fee, members join their local u3a giving them access to national and local activities.”
- **A call to action** – this could be a link to your website with a view to driving traffic to your website for further information.

You may want to add the name of someone whom the journalist can contact for further information at the bottom of the release, with telephone number and your u3a's website.

6.4 Tips for writing a media release

- Put the most important information at the top, and the least important at the bottom. Journalists often cut stories from the bottom up. If your release is journalistically written, it may not be rewritten; it may just be sub-edited and cut. Count this as a success.
- Think of who your target audience is and what might interest them.

- Think about the u3a messages and try to observe some of the u3a conventions avoiding words like 'pensioners' and 'elderly'. There is no specific lower age limit for u3a members, and we tend to say that third agers are people who no longer work full time or have responsibility for children. In the u3a, the phrase 'learning activities' is more accurate than 'classes'.
- Avoid adjectives like 'wonderful' and 'exciting'. If you have to use them, use them in a quote, but they are best not used at all. These phrases can appear subjective and people won't believe that something is exciting just because they are told it is.

6.5 Other considerations

- Write your media releases with care and ensure it is proofread by more than one person before submitting it. A poorly written media release could undermine the perceived credibility of the piece.
- It is recommended that you build up a list of all local and regional media, with email addresses and, where possible, direct telephone lines for key journalists. Contact your local council to see what communications you can access via them.
- Try to time your releases with the deadlines for local press. Journalist contacts can inform you of deadline dates. Avoid leaving it until the last minute as stories will compete for space. If you are worried about release dates you can use an 'embargo'. This is a statement at the top that the release can only be used after a certain time which enables you to put it out ahead of the event.
- Put stories on as many platforms as you can, especially social media. Journalists, especially local ones, trawl social media for stories.

6.6 Photographs

It helps if you can attach a photograph that is relevant to the media release. Ideally it will be an interesting and clear shot that enhances the story. An action shot is best, but if the release mainly concerns one person then a photo of that individual will be fine to submit as long as you have their permission. Try to send a good quality photograph – as high resolution as possible – because that increases the chances of it being used. Any photograph should be not less than 300 dpi. Provide a caption which explains what is going on in the picture and gives the names of everyone who appears in it, correctly spelled.

6.6 GDPR and permissions

Photographs are personal data therefore consent needs to be obtained to both take and display photographs. This can be in writing for small groups or individual photos. For large groups please ask people to step out of the shot if they are not happy having their photograph taken. You need to let people know how the photo will be used and who to contact if they wish to withdraw their consent at any time.

6.7 Radio and television interviews

Radio or television stations may request interviews for broadcast. The interview could take place over the phone or in the studio. If you secure an interview make sure that you are clear about what the interview is for. Is it live or recorded as live, what show is it for and will it be clipped for local news? Ask how long the interview will be and whether you will be on your own with the interviewer, or part of a panel. Always be clear what your messages are and what you are trying to achieve with the interview.

The main thing to remember is that no one (normally) is trying to trip you up. Most interviewers and producers want you to succeed. The clearer and more coherent you are, the better the broadcast result. Speak slowly, clearly and with enthusiasm and remember the u3a messages.

If the radio or television station wants to come to a u3a event, you should give them all the help and co-operation they ask for. This is excellent publicity for your u3a.

6.8 Micro-websites and blogs

A blog is literally short for "web log" and is simply a micro website. Blog styles tend to be more personal to the writer/organisation and create a powerful 'voice'. Blogs can be a platform to show an interest and knowledge in a subject. You can see the u3a blog here - <https://www.u3a.org.uk/what-we-do/news>

You can find more about the range of blogs and subjects at the blogging platform Wordpress: <https://wordpress.com/>

Remember: You don't need to be using a blog to use the same personal style in internal platforms such as your newsletters or for more human interest case studies

6.9 Public affairs and PR

Public affairs describes an organisation's relationship with its stakeholders and the influencers and policy makers within the community. Public affairs is about increasing the range of those stakeholders and getting on their agenda at a local and national level.

Remember: When public affairs work is done well, it can help to raise the awareness and understanding of the importance of the u3a within the local community.

7. Internal Communications

Good internal communication can lead to a strong sense of community, interactivity, understanding and mutual respect. Internal communication is about making members feel engaged and part of the u3a movement.

Communication platforms which help strengthen and enhance engagement include the following:

7.1 Newsletters

This can be one of the most effective ways to communicate with your membership and to share information and stories about the movement. There are many good examples from

regions, networks and individual u3as. Take time to look at other examples and share best practice. You can sign up to the national newsletter at: <https://u3a.org.uk/newsletter>.

7.2 Social media

Internal platforms such as a closed Facebook or WhatsApp group can make communicating both speedy and efficient to a large number of people. This could be used for individual groups or the u3a as a whole. For a Facebook page, the administrators can set the tone of behaviour and ethics of the group and take down any posts which don't reach the standards expected.

7.3 Email

Emails can be an effective means of communicating information quickly and to large numbers of people. Members need to be informed as to what communications the u3a will send and what the expectations are around email communication i.e. content and who will communicate. It is important not to overload members or for there to be communications that don't relate to their membership. For those who are not online it may be appropriate to inform them about facilities available at local libraries and/or consider the distribution of hard copies.

7.4 Website

Your website is a really good way of sharing information, key events, dates and interesting news with your members.

8. Improving internal Communications

8.1 Within the committee

Be proactive when you receive information from u3a Office. Discuss the contents at the committee meeting, inform members by email and/or consider having a section of your website for committee use. u3a Office committee updates will be sent to the relevant members of your committee. You need to ensure that you keep your contact details up to date. Changes can be made on the home page of the national website using the [Quick Links committee updates tab](#). Copies of the committee updates are available on the u3a website.

8.2 Within your u3a

- Consider having a newsletter editor – this doesn't have to be a committee role, but a committee member should sign off content
- Make sure your members can access the newsletter and that it is an interesting read. Have copies available at your monthly meeting and post it on your website.
- Have a 'committee column' in the newsletter to keep members informed of what the committee is doing and decisions made at meetings.
- Inform your membership about what is happening at a local, regional and national level so that they feel part of the wider u3a movement.

- Encourage members to sign up to u3a Matters.
- Produce a members' handbook.
- Compile a welcome pack for new members including a members' handbook.
- Organise a telephone tree (i.e. the committee phones the group convenors, who then phone their group members). This can be a useful way of communicating quickly especially in emergency situations.

8.3 Meetings

- Make sure general meetings are held in a place which is accessible for all e.g. non-drivers and disabled members. Ensure it has comfortable seating and if possible, kitchen facilities and a good sound system with an induction loop. Notice boards are useful, but it is easier to have your own folding boards. Also consider having a suggestion box. The programme should be interesting to encourage attendance, with good speakers and sufficient time for notices, reports, discussion, questions and socialising. Use the opportunity to welcome new members and introduce them to others. Encourage potential new members to join by having committee members chat to them about the benefits of u3a membership. Use a 'meet and greet' system with two people assigned to look out for new members. Introduce them to one or two existing members and set up a buddy system so they have somebody to go to with their queries.
- New member get-togethers with committee members and group convenors can be really welcoming and reassuring. These could be in the form of coffee mornings.
- Have regular meetings with group convenors to allow them to communicate with each other as well as catching up on current issues and future plans. It is also important to remind them how vital they are to the u3a. You could consider organising an event to thank them for their hard work, such as an annual lunch.
- Have a regular slot at monthly meetings to fill your members in on what the committee has been doing.
- Invite interested members to attend committee meetings as observers which will help avoid a "them and us" situation and possibly encourage future volunteers for the committee.

Remember: Whatever platform you use don't forget you are promoting the messages of the movement, these include:

- Lifelong learning
- Participative learning
- Friendship
- Fun
- Learning in a sociable way
- Giving structure after retirement

Related documentation

Growth Matters - u3a-KMS-DOC-014

Group Leaders/Convenors Handbook - u3a-KMS-DOC-034

The Third Age Trust Knowledge Management System	
Doc Communications – u3a-KMS-DOC-044	19/05/2026