

# Creating a Communications Strategy

## *What you'll learn...*

Part 2 of this series describes the 7 guidelines you should keep in mind when developing your communications strategy.

## Recap

**In Part 1** In Part 1 of this series we outlined how to ask the right questions to uncover the information needed to redesign your brand.

**In Part 2**, we'll explain how to build an effective communications strategy that ensures the right audiences learn about your quality rating and improvement system.

**Using the foundation you developed by asking the right questions for re-designing the brand for your quality rating and improvement system, it's now time to create a communications strategy to build awareness.**

Though we had not been involved with development of the 1.0 version of the quality rating and improvement system for Virginia's QRIS or its brand identity, it was important that we do everything possible to honor the past as we moved forward. Our goal was to create a cohesive experience for providers new to the system and develop a seamless transition to the new QRIS for providers who were already enrolled.

To that end, we first worked to examine and thoroughly understand the original QRIS standards, brand identity, naming, and all strategy and communications that had been implemented to-date.

We also identified how many providers were (and were not) participating in the current quality rating and improvement system, and determined if any were in the process of applying. Keep in mind that the way you communicate with providers who are already enrolled in the QRIS will differ from the way you connect with new providers. (Hint: If transitioning to the new system is simple, that communication will be much easier!)

In our work with Virginia's quality rating and improvement system, we identified seven guidelines to be aware of when developing your communications strategy.

*[Read on...](#)*



## **GUIDELINE #1:**

### **Identify Your Audiences**

Broadly speaking, there are three main audiences to consider in our communications work with quality rating and improvement systems: internal, middle, and external.

#### **Internal Audience**

##### **Group 1**

Group 1 refers to those partners directly engaged in this work. They meet on a regular basis and are a core audience because they are both leading the effort and doing the work itself. These partners need to be aligned with your priorities, goals, outcomes, and progress.

**In Virginia, Group 1 of the Internal Audience included** the regional and local coordinators, parts of the Department of Social Services, the early-childhood foundation, Department of Education, and others

who collaborated directly as partners—meeting on a regular basis, serving as the core team in developing the new QRIS. This group was both leading and doing the work, and as such, they needed to be aligned with the new priorities, goals, outcomes, and progress.

##### **Group 2**

Group 2 also needs to be aligned with Group 1—especially with all of the messages related to the overall quality rating and improvement system. This audience is integral to spreading the message, encouraging providers to enroll in the QRIS, and adding value to the continuous quality improvement system effort.

**In Virginia, Group 2 of the Internal Audience included** Virginia Infant & Toddler Specialist Network, Child Care Aware of Virginia, Virginia Cross-Sector Professional

Development Team, early-intervention organizations, accreditation organizations, early childhood associations, and licensing agents from the Department of Social Services. This cohort needed to be aligned with Group 1—especially in regards to the messages and priorities of the new QRIS. Because they were on the front line with the state’s provider audience, this network was incredibly valuable—their help was critical as we sought to encourage providers to participate in the new system which focused on continuous quality improvement.

### **Middle Audience**

The focus for the Middle Audience is at a big-picture level—making sure they understand the underlying purpose of this work, as well as the goals and challenges envisioned for your state’s quality rating and improvement system. In addition, they should be connected to the progress and achievements of your efforts.

#### **In Virginia, the Middle Audience included:**

- Legislators and policymakers
- Dept of Health & Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families
- Department of Social Services (related to reporting functions related to early care and education)

### **External Audiences**

External Audiences are defined as those who directly benefit from this effort, yet they’re not engaged with doing the work itself. They need to understand the benefits of your state’s quality rating and improvement system—from their own points of view.

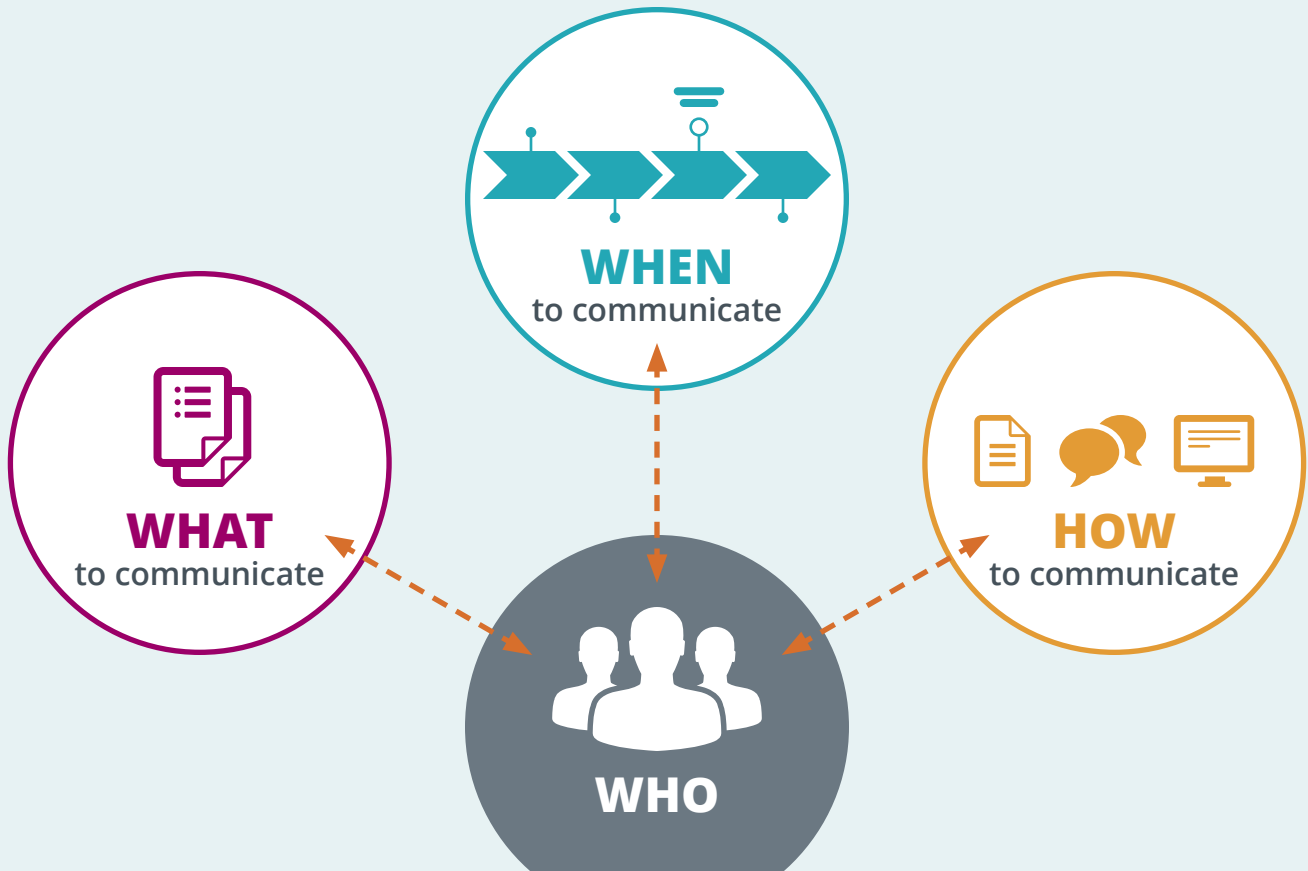
#### **In Virginia, the External Audiences included:**

##### **Primary**

- Child care providers – further categorized by:
  - Currently rated programs
  - Types of providers
  - Director/administrators
  - Teachers
- Parents/Families – further categorized by:
  - Parents who are with a currently rated provider
  - Parents who are with a non-participating provider

##### **Secondary**

- Higher education – early childhood education
- Universities
- Community colleges
- Business leaders
- Funders – federal, state, and local government as well as private organizations



## **GUIDELINE #2:**

### **Establish Goals for Each Audience**

As noted above, you'll need to develop clear communication goals for both the middle and external audiences, and confirm that your internal audiences agree with those goals. Once those key groups are aligned, you can focus on **who** you need to communicate with, as well as **what** and **when** you need to communicate to each audience. It's only then that you can determine **how** you should communicate.

In Virginia, we first established the most important, high-level goals to ensure success for the QRIS; they were:

- Define standards for early childhood education so that there is a way to measure if programs in Virginia are high quality and support children's learning, development, and school success
- Engage a range of diverse stakeholders in support of quality early child care and learning
- Create a framework for accountability
- Establish a network of support and outreach for programs and practitioners
- Provide financial incentives linked to achieving and maintaining the quality standards
- Improve the information available to parents as they choose programs

- Improve children’s lives by improving the quality of early child care and education of young children in Virginia
- Increase access to high-quality early child care and school age programs through participation in the quality rating and improvement system

After the internal groups were aligned on these high-level goals for the new version of Virginia’s QRIS, we established specific goals for each of the audiences, as they were all integral to the success of the quality rating and improvement system. Goals were written for each of these groups.

### **GUIDELINE #3:**

## **Define the Three Parts of Your QRIS**

In this effort to shift the focus of a quality rating and improvement system toward a goal of continuous quality improvement, it’s key to realize that your QRIS is more than simply a list of standards for early care and education. Rather, there are three components (shown below) to a successful quality rating and improvement system—all of them valuable and necessary to achieve the goal of improving the quality of early care and education.



## Regulating Authority

This element reflects the fact that your quality rating and improvement system will include a requirement that programs must meet all the requirements of your state's licensing and/or regulatory authority.

## Quality Rating Standards

The quality rating standards set the stage for continuous quality improvement. As programs progress through the process, they're assessed on certain quality features (based on your state's specific criteria) and shown how to continue improving their quality.

## Professional Development

The professional development aspect of your QRIS refers to the necessary training, learning, and coaching you offer to providers so their programs can continue to deliver high-quality services.

Before you can effectively market the goals and vision of your QRIS to the different audiences, you must have a full understanding of what these three components are, and how they work together to deliver value and benefits to your quality rating and improvement system.

## GUIDELINE #4:

### Examine Your Current Name, Logo, and Brand Identity

Before thinking about any changes that will be needed to update your brand in light of your new communications strategy, it's important to use fresh eyes to examine the current QRIS name, logo, and brand identity. (In [Part 3](#) of this series, we'll explore this idea in more detail.)

At this stage in our work with Virginia, we looked at all the marketing and communication work they had done to-date and determined that, going forward, the need was to simplify. Simplification for Virginia meant creating a single brand that was built around clear messages and a memorable visual identity. You'll see how this came to fruition in [Part 3](#).

Remember that—when redesigning your brand—you'll want to consider the many different cultures and languages of your state's residents. The idea is for all relevant audiences to connect with this work, so the brand should connect with them as well.

## GUIDELINE #5:

### Outline the Three Levels of Communication

When communicating with different audiences, keep in mind that each will need a different level of information, so be sure your messaging meets their needs and considers their point of view. (See details below.) As an overall guideline, the messages should be written in a positive tone—clearly conveying to each audience the benefits of your quality rating and improvement system.

#### Level 1 – Highest Level of Detail

##### Audiences:

- Internal Audiences (see list on page 3)
  - Group 1
  - Group 2

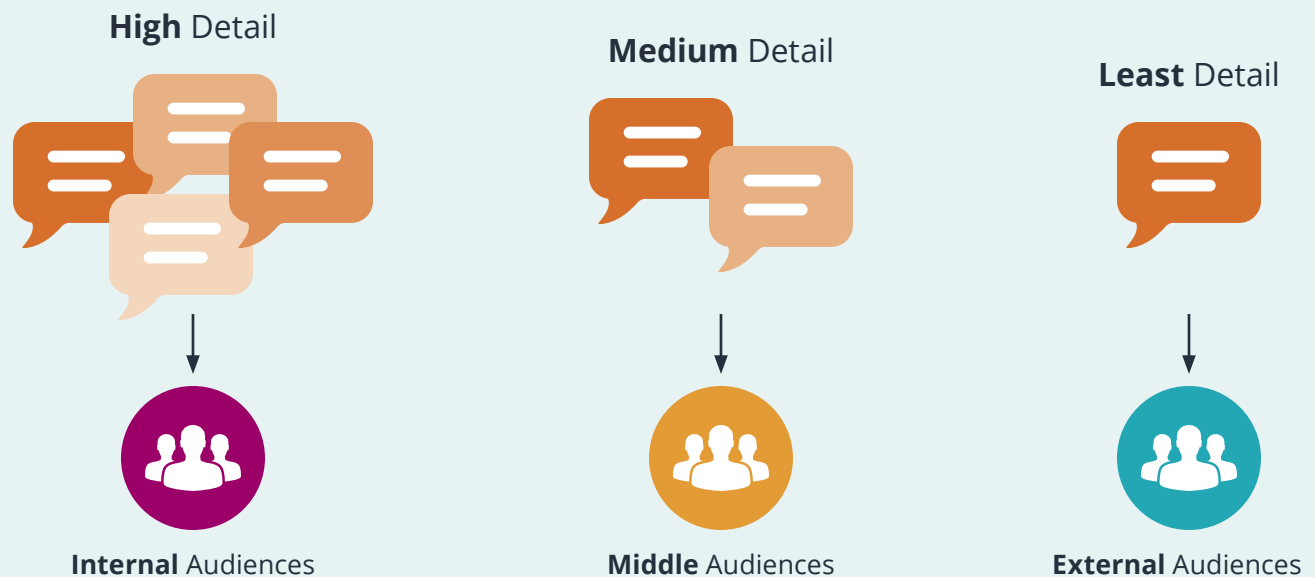
- External Audiences
  - Childcare Providers
  - Funders

All of these audiences are delivering, participating in, or financially supporting the services of your system; consequently they have a vested interest in having a deep understanding of how the QRIS works. Accordingly, you'll need to provide detailed information on who you are, what you do, how you do it, and where you want to go.

#### Level 2 – Medium Level of Detail

##### Audiences:

- Middle Audiences
  - State and federal legislators
  - Policymakers
  - Dept of Health & Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (Office of Child Care)





- Administration (commissioner) from the Department of Social Services

- **External Audiences**

- Higher education
- Business leaders

While these audiences are less intimately involved with the QRIS and probably don't have daily engagement with the system, they do need to connect with the important value that your quality rating and improvement system delivers and understand why it's needed. You should provide them with, they need a medium level of information clarifying who you are, what you do, how you do it, and where you want to go.

### Level 3 – Least Level of Detail

#### Audience:

- Parents and families

For this audience, they need to understand how your quality rating and improvement system works; at the same time, we know that they will only be interested in what matters to them right now. To that end, the most effective way to connect with and engage this audience is to convey simple information in clear, concise, easy-to-understand ways—communicating who you are, what you do, how you do it, and where you want to go.



### GUIDELINE #6:

## Establish the Order and Priority for Communications

You can see from Guideline #1 above that there are a lot of different audiences to reach through your communications strategy. And you read above that each of these audiences needs a different level of information about

your quality rating and improvement system. How do you prioritize your communications and decide when to reach out to each audience?

In the case of Virginia, we determined that the first focus needed to be Groups 1 and 2 of the internal audience; our second focus was the primary external audience: providers and parents/families of enrolled providers.

## **PRIORITY #1:**

### **Internal Audience (Groups 1 & 2)**

Communicating first with these key stakeholders is critical for one important reason: they are the biggest connectors linking your QRIS to the state's providers and other audiences. For that reason, if the goals and messages are not aligned with them, then the communication effort with those other audiences will be either ineffective, or (even worse) disconnected, inconsistent, and misaligned—creating messages that are potentially confusing or damaging to the brand.

#### **Your communications goals for internal audiences should clearly convey:**

- 1 How a QRIS works and its role in the larger partner framework
- 2 The new changes to your revised standards
- 3 That the QRIS system is not in competition with other existing quality systems in the state; instead it's a way to achieve the goal of continuous quality improvement system for the providers in your state
- 4 A demonstrated increase in efforts to collaborate
- 5 Increased participation by providers throughout your state
- 6 Improvements to the information available to providers and parents/families
- 7 How children's lives are improved by quality improvements in early care and education
- 8 The increased access to high-quality early care and education and school-age programs through participation in the quality rating and improvement systems

## **PRIORITY #2:**

### **Providers (enrolled and not-enrolled) and Parents/Families Through Providers**

This part of your communications should clarify to providers the benefits of participation, and the role of a quality rating and improvement system in helping them achieve their goals for both their program and the children in their care.

As part of the communications strategy for Virginia, we developed two versions of messaging to target providers. **For participating providers who were already enrolled in the QRIS, our messages:**

- Conveyed a clear understanding of the new-levels based quality standards and how this change affected current providers
- Provided simple directions for how current providers could transition to the new standards

**For non-participating providers who were not already enrolled in Virginia's quality rating and improvement system, our messages:**

- Delivered a clear understanding of the benefits of participation
- Identified the two paths for becoming rated:
  - Standard Path
  - Fast Track (open to eligible providers who received credit for being part of another quality-focused organization)
- Portrayed QRIS participation as the best way to show the program was committed

to quality, and that it was the best way to improve their program's quality

- Defined what quality meant
- Stated why quality matters
- Described how to apply

**Through the QRIS-enrolled providers, we could also start to reach local parents and families, educating them about:**

- What the quality rating and improvement system is and why it's important
- Their provider's commitment to quality care and learning
- What each of the levels means (note that this was described in a very brief overview)

**GUIDELINE #7:**

**Create a Special Plan for Communicating to Non-Participating Providers**

Enrollment in Virginia's quality rating and improvement system is voluntary. (At the time we started the work to rebrand Virginia's QRIS, there were nearly 5,000 non-participating providers that we wanted to engage.) As a result, our communications strategy involved developing attractive materials that focused on clearly outlining the benefits of participation and encouraging enrollment in the system.

In addition, we specifically created materials that benefited not only providers, but also their clients—parents and families of children who attended their program—and offered those materials to the providers free-of-charge to deliver added value to their programs and an incentive for enrolling in the QRIS.

**What's Next in This Series?**

Read **Part 3** of this series for examples of marketing materials created as part of the communications strategy for Virginia Quality.

## About Orange Square

Orange Square is dedicated to improving the lives of children and their families by combining your expertise in QRIS with our expertise in marketing communications and the QRIS National Learning Network.

Together with you, we work to improve the quality of early care and education by building public awareness and engagement.



Learn more about our services and knowledge on QRIS marketing communications at [orangesquare.com/QRIS](https://orangesquare.com/QRIS)



Join our LinkedIn group dedicated to QRIS marketing and communications at [linkedin.com/groups/8540612](https://linkedin.com/groups/8540612)



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