



Vermont Agency  
of Transportation  
Research Section

# Communication Plan

**January 18, 2024**

**Prepared by**



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## Executive Summary

The objective of this tactical communication plan is to provide the Vermont Agency of Transportation Research Section a manageable and trackable path to communicate with internal and external stakeholders. The primary objective of this plan is not only to recommend the “what,” but also to understand the “why” behind the communication products we produce for the AOT.

Communication goals provide a framework each part of the plan is built upon, and these were developed, where possible, with the AOT strategic plan goals in mind.

The information provided in this plan such as target audience personas and messaging themes will help ensure communication products focus on achieving the research section’s communication goals in a targeted and consistent manner.

ARA’s recommendations are based upon previous successful projects and a review of existing AOT communication efforts and other state research program communication items. The scope and size of the AOT support contract also informed these recommendations as to make them achievable under this effort.

## Situation Analysis

Before communication strategies can be devised to reach target audiences, it is necessary to assess where your organization currently stands in the minds of those audiences. This defines the situation before the communication plan is implemented.

The AOT Research Section currently executes internal and external communication via its website and email communication through Constant Contact. It operates under the branding of the larger AOT, but does not carry any specific branding for the Research Section. The AOT maintains several social media accounts, but research items and news do not go out through these channels.

AOT project communication currently falls under the responsibility of the research champions that are paired with research projects. Each project has its own project page on the website which contains basic project info, images of the project’s symposium poster, links to factsheets, presentations, reports, etc., information on the project team, and a section for implementation. This format provides a consistent look to each project, but most pages do not include all items. Fact sheets follow a general format and provide the pertinent information for each project.

Email communication is specific and generally focused on one item. These communications are archived on the Research Section website. The frequency of this communication is currently as-needed. From August 2018 until June 2023, a quarterly newsletter delivered news and project updates. As of now, that newsletter has been discontinued.

Finally, each year, the Research and Innovation Symposium serves as a major communication activity. This event brings together researchers, champions, and other AOT personnel to showcase the state of current projects.

We believe that modifications and additions can be made to current practices that will improve the quality and quantity of communication without significantly changing existing procedures.

## AOT Research Section Mission and Goals

### Mission Statement

We seek to conduct a program of high-quality, applied research—advancing solutions to the increasingly complex needs confronting Vermont’s transportation future.

### Communication Goals

- Share research and innovation activities, both externally and internally
- Aid research implementation
- Highlight research successes
- Deliver more consistent and frequent communication
- Gain recognition for research projects (High priority projects)
- Measure AOT research mentions across channels

### Additional Goal Not Within Scope of Project

- Develop method to track research implementation

### AOT Strategic Plan – Ways to Address Goals with Communication

The AOT strategic plan presents agency-wide goals. The following are goals that our team believe the Research Section can support and a brief summary of how it can do so.

**Goal 1:** Promote organizational excellence by attracting, developing, and retaining a talented, diverse, and engaged workforce.

- Spotlight research champions through profiles, recognition, etc. This method will help engage and recognize these personnel going above and beyond their typical job description.

**Goal 2:** Grow economy by providing a safe, reliable, and efficient transportation system in a state of good repair.

- Communicate how research projects make the transportation system safer, more reliable, more efficient, or in a better state of repair. This can be accomplished by highlighting the impacts of implementation during project communication.

**Goal 3:** Make VT more affordable and serve the vulnerable by providing accessible, convenient, and affordable travel choices.

- Highlight accessibility implications of research where applicable during project communication (Ex: 20-3 RRFBs).

**Goal 4:** Provide a sustainable and energy efficient and advanced technology transportation system.

- Highlight sustainability, energy efficiency, and tech advancements as applicable during project communication.

**Goal 5:** Modernize and improve government efficiency through innovation, continuous improvement, and quality customer service.

- Highlight time and dollar savings as part of implementation impacts where appropriate.

## Key Messaging Themes

- Our research enables implementation.
- Our research contributes important results to the larger body of transportation research.
- Our research is meaningful.
- Our research champions are critical members of the team and should be recognized.
- A small program can deliver major contributions.
- Our research program is a desirable partner for universities and other research entities.

## Target Audiences

Our team worked with AOT Research Section personnel to define the following target audiences for our communication efforts. Under each section, the audience is listed in order of priority.

### Internal Audiences

- AOT leadership. Reaching this audience will ensure continued engagement and reinforce value of research program to overall AOT operations.
- General AOT personnel. The primary goal of reaching this audience is to boost awareness. Additional benefits include widening the potential pool for research ideas and champions.
- Other Vermont state agencies (i.e., Environmental Conservation, Stormwater, Agency of Commerce and Community Development, etc.). Research ideas can come from anywhere, and in the past, have involved partnership with other state agencies. Improving the frequency and reach of communication within these agencies opens the door for more multi-agency projects.

### External Audiences

- **State transportation research groups.** Engaging and building relationships with other research groups provides opportunities for two-way communication to build additional awareness of Vermont-based research, collaborate, share research results, and offer expertise. There are two subgroups within this audience group.
  - New England—this group consists of the New England Transportation Consortium (NETC), similar states such as New Hampshire and Maine, and less similar states such as Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts.
  - Beyond—this group consists of other states with similarities to Vermont, but that are not geographically adjacent. These similarities could include research interests, weather, and/or geography.
- Vermont Regional Planning Commissions (includes Chittenden County Regional MPO). These local groups are key for research implementation. Ongoing and improved communication between the Research Section and these groups can open additional opportunities to present the value of research projects and potentially identify partners for research projects.
- Qualified researchers. Engaging with this group allows the Research Section to not only present successful projects, but also to spark interest in future projects and solicit ideas. Additionally, with this group, we hope to engage more junior faculty at universities to search for potential new research partners.
- University Transportation Centers. Due to the variety of UTCs across the U.S., engaging them and making them aware of our research interests opens the door for additional partnership opportunities. The regional UTC we will connect with is located at UMass Amherst.
- Research peers. Engaging with other researchers through groups (AASHTO Research Advisory Committee, TRB Research Innovation Implementation Management Committee) and organizations (TRB, NCHRP, or TRIP) is designed to increase awareness of research activities and identify potential research partners. This audience overlaps with several others, but greater opportunities for relationship-building through ongoing meetings and events makes this another worthy audience.
- State Legislators. This audience will be reached using already-created materials generated by the Research Section to pique interest and excitement among state legislators. The venue for reaching them will be through the research presentation given to the legislature, but recommended social media activities could also reach this audience as well.

## Recommendations

**Develop unique branding for the AOT Research Section.** A unified brand package will serve several goals. First, it will tie all Research Section communications together under a uniform logo, look, and feel to establish consistency. Branding also increases the perceived level of professionalism in communication. Work on this can begin immediately and run concurrently with the development of the high priority research project communication items for the beginning of the new year. This task can be accomplished using **Task 3F: Graphic Design Services: 20 Hours of Support**. The branding package would include:

- Logo package appropriate for usage across multiple mediums- digital and print
- Updated factsheet and poster templates
- Presentation templates
- E-mail template for Constant Contact

**Establish framework for project communication.** Our proposed framework identifies HOW we talk about research projects. The “voice” we write in will be intended for a non-technical audience. This ensures maximum potential reach for our message and project communication. Additionally, we reviewed the criteria that the committee uses to select HVR projects and believe we can incorporate those elements into all project communication where applicable. These elements include:

- How it addresses a demonstrated need, answers a question, or deals with a documented problem
- Benefits/Value
  - Benefits vs. cost of implementation
  - Impact on sponsoring agency
  - Positive effects on business practices- lead to agency change?
  - Implementing agencies are making demonstrated progress in implementing research results or following project recommendations
- Project Objectives
- Valid results?
  - Does it support the project recommendations?
- How is the project innovative?
- Tell the project’s story
  - Linked technical summaries, video, pictures, tech briefs, benefits summaries

**Focus communication efforts around high-priority research projects.** Using this approach, we recommend the Research Section prioritize resources to two to three projects that demonstrate the highest potential value. These would include any projects intended to be submitted as HVR candidates to AASHTO. In terms of deliverables, this would include:

- Expanded factsheets/case studies for the select projects (Task 3A-Option1)
- Supporting infographics as appropriate (Task 3D-Option2)
- Poster design for TRB (optional)
- Video highlighting HVR candidates for the year (to be split into clips and attached to HVR submission) (Task 3B- Option1)
- Spring/Summer- Video focusing on any HVR selectees (optional)

Using this approach for high-priority projects combined with the below recommendations for other ongoing communication, we believe the Research Section can spotlight and promote its high-priority research candidate projects effectively despite having a modest budget for communication-related activities.

**Formalize a schedule for ongoing external communication efforts.** The successes and failures of newsletters and other communications are based in consistency and content. Consistent communication is extremely important in establishing a rhythm and an expectation for your readers. Based on email marketing research, we believe email communications should go out on Tuesday during mid-morning unless timeliness dictates otherwise.

- **Newsletter.** We recommend the Research Section resume the newsletter, but as a monthly release. Our work with FHWA has shown that an intentional design, intentional release schedule, and consistency can and will build a successful tool to raise audience awareness of your activities. Additionally, we recommend a standard content format for this newsletter divided into four sections- two of which are always present and the other two are present as needed. This format consists of:
  - One project spotlight (max 250 words)
    - Brief update on status
    - Why it's important to the public or body of research
  - People/Partner spotlight (~150 words)
    - Profile champion or partner organization
  - Upcoming events (optional)
  - Implementation news (optional)
- This is your high-level informational “drip” to your audiences. This newsletter will serve as a monthly reminder that, “we’re here, we’re getting results, and anything important will be delivered to your computer on (as an example) the first Tuesday of each month.” This content can repurpose/repackage existing content from project summaries, expanded project factsheets, etc. Our suggestion would be that the people/partner profiles be generated as one large batch then spread over the course of the year. Our team could accomplish this batch packaged under a single **Task 3A-option 1** deliverable. Delivery of this newsletter could either be accomplished by Research Section personnel or our team could support under a modified **Task3F- Writing Services- 20 hours of support**, which should cover the time required to put together and deliver 12 issues over a year.

**Implement Social Media Strategy.** We understand that the research center hasn't promoted project content in the past, but we believe it can be done for no additional cost on our team's side. Each time our team creates a deliverable, we can also deliver social media text focused on public benefits of a project that can be used on the AOT platforms. This will be delivered as a separate short word document that includes the text, any appropriate hyperlinks, and images to use. At that point, it simply becomes a matter of establishing a schedule with the social media manager for AOT on how often they'd allow the Research Section to post (we suggest 1-2 per month to start) and submitting the Word file to them ahead of time. Items such as champion profiles are additional items to consider cross-posting.

Currently, AOT Twitter has ~2,500 followers and AOT Facebook has ~48,000 followers. There is no official LinkedIn page, but that would be ideal for our type of content if it were ever used.

**Update “Innovations” webpage.** As time allows, our team could produce writeups for the Innovations page on your website using **Task3A-Option4**.

**Project webpages.** We recommend inquiring with IT to see if the projects could embed their factsheet as the main image instead of having a summary and then a link to the fact sheet.

## Proposed Timeline of Activities

		Month 1				Month 2				Month 3				Month 4				Month 5				Month 6				Month 7				Month 8				Month 9				Month 10				Month 11				Month 12			
Activities		1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Develop Branding	1.1 Branding																																																
	2.1 Project Expanded Factsheet																																																
HVR Project Communications	2.2 Project Expanded Factsheet																																																
	2.3 TRB Poster Design (Optional)																																																
	2.4 Create Candidate Video																																																
	2.4 Optional Selectee Video																																																
	3.1 Monthly Email Newsletter																																																
Other Communication Efforts	3.1.1 Solicit Research Ideas																																																
	3.2 Create Social Media Content																																																
	3.3 Capture Champion/Partner Profiles																																																

## Measures of Success

The primary measure of success for social media and email content will be measured in reach (social media hits, email subscriber growth) and engagement (likes, shares, email opens, clickthroughs). Our team will run a report on Meltwater monthly to discover external content shares and the additional reach they give. Additionally, we will monitor email subscribers and open rates monthly through Constant Contact to look at growth/contraction and engagement. Additionally, our team may conduct a content survey through existing email content to determine user satisfaction with our content (pending legality of conducting such a survey in Vermont).

## Appendices

### SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis is a strategic planning technique used to help an organization identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

<b>Strengths (Internal)</b>	<b>Weaknesses (Internal)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agency leadership already engaged with program</li> <li>• Agency recognizes communication is a priority</li> <li>• Budgeted tech transfer funds</li> <li>• Low communication approval overhead</li> <li>• Passionate research champions</li> <li>• Research Section is eager to improve communication quality and frequency</li> <li>• Not worried about reduced funding due to operation at Federal minimum level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited funding &amp; staffing</li> <li>• Small reach for existing communication items</li> <li>• Limited implementation information is being communicated</li> <li>• Relies on other groups for videography assets</li> <li>• Limited ability to access social media channels</li> <li>• Research projects are smaller and have more restrictions than other states, therefore attract less attention from universities</li> <li>• Symposium size and reach</li> <li>• Unsure of types of content target audiences will engage with</li> <li>• Fewer research projects means less opportunities to communicate updates and results</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities (External)</b>	<b>Obstacles/Threats (External)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A larger symposium could generate more attention and participation                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proven model</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Fewer research projects per year allows opportunity for greater focus and promotion on high-value projects</li> <li>• Explaining the “why” of research</li> <li>• Universities want to work with the AOT</li> <li>• Ties to academic world</li> <li>• National attention on infrastructure</li> <li>• Emily’s roles in RAC and RIIM present opportunity for additional attention to research activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other research centers have more money, less restrictions</li> <li>• Other states with similar interests but larger budgets may pull attention</li> <li>• Public lack of awareness of research activities</li> <li>• Disinterest in research compared to infrastructure problems public can directly observe</li> <li>• People obtain information in an ever-increasing number of ways</li> </ul>

## Audience Personas

# AOT Andrew

### BACKGROUND:

- AOT Structures
- Has been with the Agency for 5 years
- Aware of Research Section but couldn't tell you the types of work you're doing
- Busy with current work but interested in what goes on around the Agency.

### DEMOGRAPHICS:

- White Male
- 30
- Married
- Suburban Montpelier



# AOT Andrew

## GOALS:

- Find success in career
- Grow family

## CHALLENGES:

- Works in small team, so very time-constrained
- Doesn't understand research world
- Packed inbox, so skims or deletes communication not directly related to work
- Isn't familiar with Research Section website and isn't subscribed to newsletter



# AOT Andrew

## HOW WE REACH ANDREW:

- Find him and communicate with him where he already finds information on the AOT.
  - AOT social media channels
  - Larger internal AOT communication vehicles (newsletters, announcements, website, etc.)
  - Encourage his colleagues to share the messages they see with their coworkers



# Transportation Tonia

## **BACKGROUND:**

- Regional Planning Commission delegate for her town
- On Transportation Advisory Committee for the Commission
- Employed by City in Public Works
- Deeply cares about her community
- Aware of Research Section and is interested in how its work can help her local area

## **DEMOGRAPHICS:**

- African-American Female
- 50
- Married
- Addison, VT



# Transportation Tonia

## GOALS:

- Help her city and region grow safety
- Balance this extra duty with work and family

## CHALLENGES:

- Leads a busy personal and professional life
- Has to prioritize transportation recommendations from a small budget and limited resources
- Is familiar with research, but sometimes doesn't see the direct benefits or how it could be implemented on a small scale



# Transportation Tonia

## HOW WE REACH TONIA:

- Present during Regional Planning Commission Meetings
- Speak to direct, scalable benefits of research
- Present with implementation in mind
- Show her examples of how other towns implemented research
- Encourage to join email list
- Invite her to the symposium



# Researcher Randy

## BACKGROUND:

- Transportation researcher at UMass Amherst in regional UTC
- Faculty and long-time transportation researcher
- Aware of Research Section and wants to figure out how to work with AOT
- Has been unsuccessful working with AOT in past

## DEMOGRAPHICS:

- White Male
- 55
- Married
- Amherst, Mass



# Researcher Randy

## GOALS:

- Solve complex transportation problems through research
- Increase work with regional state governments

## CHALLENGES:

- Is managing multiple research projects in addition to teaching duties
- Feels pressure to seek out larger funding sources
- Doesn't have time to market to smaller state transportation agencies
- May not see value in seeking work with smaller agencies



# Researcher Randy

## HOW WE REACH RANDY:

- Discover and communicate the value proposition for working with the Vermont AOT
- Investigate the UTC's research priorities and discover where they overlap with the AOT's
- Continue putting information on AOT research in front of him through email communication and targeted social media like LinkedIn
- Invite Randy and his colleagues to the symposium
- Look for an opportunity to have Randy come speak to research champions on an area of research where AOT and UTC interests overlap



# Legislator Lana

## BACKGROUND:

- State House Representative
- Member of Transportation Standing Committee
- Not a transportation professional
- Aware the state conducts transportation research
- Only familiar with research work on a surface level

## DEMOGRAPHICS:

- White Female
- 53
- Married
- Burlington



# Legislator Lana

## GOALS:

- Make informed decisions on transportation issues for state
- Responsibly use taxpayer funds
- Build body of work for potential future political office

## CHALLENGES:

- Tasked with transportation issues, but not a transportation professional
- Research can feel disconnected from what she sees and understands with transportation
- Her attention is pulled in many directions during legislative sessions
- Information overload during daily work



# Legislator Lana

## HOW WE REACH LANA:

- Identify her transportation passions and interests
- Identify research projects that overlap with her passions and interests
- Prepare targeted presentations on high-value projects that intersect with her interests and passions for research presentation in Feb-May
- Consider future research and include as a “stretch goal.”
- Invite her to speak at the symposium

