



Core Competencies for Court Communicators

In the 1990s, courts began employing public information officers (PIOs) to handle media relations and high-profile cases. Over time, courts expanded their public information offices to include a variety of communication staff to aid their broader public relations efforts. Meanwhile, as the traditional news media began shrinking, it became more important for courts to find other ways to communicate with the public. As a reflection of that expansion and the professional diversity of its membership, the Conference of Court Public Information Officers in 2018 rebranded itself as “CCPIO: The Association for Court Communicators.”

The following list of core competencies reflects the range of skills court communicators use and the spectrum of their expertise. It should not be viewed as a baseline list of job requirements for any individual court communicator but rather an expansive catalogue of potential duties for a fully staffed court communications office. Funding and staffing of court communications offices directly impacts court communicators’ ability to perform these tasks.

Court communicators help courts build public trust and confidence and can be found at all levels of the justice system. Today’s CCPIO members include a wide range of specialists in media relations, civic education, community engagement, website development, social media, publications and graphics design, data visualization, photography, videography and digital storytelling. They also may be involved in governmental affairs, internal communications and law-related education. Some work alone; others are part of or manage large communications teams.

Court communicators must have excellent oral and written communication skills, prioritize multiple high-level projects effectively, and work collaboratively with a wide range of people. They need a thorough knowledge of their court system and its legal processes and must be able to explain the legal system and legal jargon to non-legal audiences.

CCPIO is a valuable resource both in helping courts establish court communications positions and in providing continuing education for current court communicators.

Media Relations

Media relations is often a court communicator's primary responsibility. Its overall objective is to build goodwill between the courts and the media – both locally and more broadly – and continually educate reporters about the work of the courts and their impact on society, so they can educate their audiences. Related competencies may include:

- Build and maintain a reputation among both court personnel and media as a credible, trusted source of timely, accurate and understandable information.
- Advise judges, administrators and other key court personnel about news trends and media issues, prioritizing those requiring immediate attention or action.
- Be familiar with editors, news directors and reporters who cover courts; any specialties they may have; their news cycles; and their deadlines.
- Develop and promote newsworthy stories about the court and its work by creating clear, engaging content incorporating plain language and appropriate news writing style; determining the best tool(s) to tell the story; and tailoring the story for maximum effectiveness, whether pitching the media or telling the story directly.
- Determine the appropriate times to act as spokesperson and the appropriate times to arrange for judges, court personnel or external experts (such as bar leaders, law professors or community justice partners) to speak.
- Prepare judges and court personnel to speak effectively to the media by advising them about the fundamentals of interviewing; how to stay on message; the importance of visuals in settings and materials; and the appropriate uses of speaking with the media "on the record," "not for attribution," "for background," and "off the record."
- Create, implement and measure media plans, generally or for specific events or issues.
- Develop and coordinate educational programs to help the media better understand the courts, to help judges and court leaders better understand the media, and to promote dialogue between courts and media.
- Produce online content, media guides, information booklets, historic guides or other informative publications to assist reporters in covering the courts.
- Draft and distribute timely summaries of pending cases and decisions to media.
- Manage media needs in high-profile cases, including courtroom seating, overflow media rooms, access to court documents, designated media areas, satellite truck accommodations, electronic device rules, etc.

Crisis Communications

Crises affecting the courts might take a variety of forms, including pandemics, cyberattacks, facility problems, natural disasters or temporary weather-related issues, disinformation or doxxing campaigns, deaths of judges or court personnel, violence against court employees or buildings, or even a divisive case generating national attention.

In any emergency affecting a court, its communicators should be members of the court's leadership response team and should be involved in continuity of operations (COOP) planning. The COOP plan should include protocols and tools for internal and external communications during any crisis to ensure public trust and confidence in the courts. Related competencies may include:

Operational crisis communications

- Identify various emergency situations, both short and long term, most likely to affect the court, its judges and its personnel; anticipate likely questions from internal and external audiences; and develop a crisis communications plan to prevent information vacuums, and mitigate misinformation.
- Maintain positive relationships and share after-hours contact information with internal and external leaders who can be part of the court's crisis response network.
- Work with court leaders, security personnel and information technology staff to ensure the court's COOP plan incorporates clear, written protocols gathering and disseminating information quickly to employees and the public, even when traditional means of communication are unavailable.

Reputational crisis communications

- Combat any snowballing effect of erroneous or negative stories by distinguishing inaccuracies and mistakes from misinformation/malinformation/disinformation, calculating the potential impact, and determine if and how to respond.
- Prepare key court leaders to move quickly, ensuring the court's point of view is included in fast-moving news cycles.
- Work with the bar and other related groups in responding to unfair judicial criticism.

Event Planning

Court communicators can play a vital role in ensuring the success of court events. Examples can include celebrations such as adoption days or treatment court graduations; ceremonies such as judicial investitures, portrait unveilings or retirements; news events such as building openings or project kickoffs or culminations; and programs designed to inform and engage the public. Related competencies may include:

- Determine the best type of event to achieve the court’s goals and ultimately support public trust and confidence in the courts and the effective administration of justice.
- Plan the agenda, determine appropriate speakers and topics for each and script a “run of show” document.
- Anticipate and work with key court leaders (including facilities, information technology and security personnel) to develop a written plan for managing logistics, including invitations and RSVPs, crowd control, parking, seating and overflow arrangements, decorations, refreshments; and whether attendees may bring electronic devices.
- Coordinate audio-visual equipment as needed.
- Determine and arrange for auxiliary listening devices or sign-language interpreters for public events.
- Publicize events as appropriate through media tools or community justice partners.
- Accommodate reporters’ audio and visual needs, arrange for pool coverage and follow up with additional information or interviews.
- Create media materials for distribution.
- Measure results of public events, such as by surveying attendees or tracking news articles, broadcast coverage and social media posts.

Education & Outreach

The public must trust and have confidence in courts for the judicial system to function effectively. Court communicators help courts provide informative programs to educate the public and help build positive relationships with the communities the courts serve. Related competencies may include:

Civic education

- Develop programs to educate students about the judicial branch (e.g., court tours, mock trials, Careers in the Courts Day, mentoring or internship programs) and create curricula or other materials for teachers to use.
- Develop similar programs or activities targeting adult groups such as civic groups, chamber leadership groups, or even visits to elder-care facilities.
- Create a court tours program that can be adapted to various audiences (e.g., school children, senior citizens, visiting judges).
- Respond to public inquiries and provide online answers to frequently asked questions.
- Ensure the court website has pertinent, up-to-date information designed for the public.
- Develop broadcast or online programs or public service announcements or campaigns to inform the public about legal topics.

Community outreach

- Partner with community organizations and the bar to initiate and develop outreach programs and informational print and audio-visual materials that address community issues, build interest and foster support.
- Arrange opportunities for judges and court personnel to speak with community boards, schools and other interested groups.
- Plan and coordinate special events and programs, such as Law Day, Take Your Daughter to Work or court openings.
- Plan and coordinate opportunities for judges and court leaders to listen to community concerns, use what is learned to improve court processes, and educate the community about changes made as a result.

Judicial branch advocacy

- Write speeches or op-eds for judges, court administrators or other judicial branch officials to ensure consistent messaging about the role and responsibilities of courts, how judges make decisions, and issues impacting courts and those who use them.

Internal Communications

A well-informed workforce is essential to serving the public, dispelling rumors and promoting the broader flow of court communications externally. Providing accurate and timely information to judges and court personnel is often part of a court communicator's responsibility. Related competencies may include:

- Compile and regularly distribute a clippings packet of news articles and broadcast clips relating to the courts.
- Write, edit or oversee production of content for employee publications, the court's intranet and other internal communications.
- Develop and implement a plan for communicating directives to employees in cases of emergency (including as part of the court's continuity of operations plan, or COOP).

Digital Communications & Publications

Court websites, digital communications (such as social media feeds) and publications (such as annual reports, brochures, fact sheets, jury guides and newsletters) efficiently provide timely, accurate, engaging information about the judiciary's activities to broad audiences. Related competencies may include:

- Maintain the court's website, making sure it is updated regularly with clear, user-friendly, easily navigable content.
- Create content of interest to people engaging with the court, such as parties to cases, lawyers and jurors, as well as general content informing the public about the court's role and its relationship to the other branches of government.
- Write in clear, non-legalistic language supplemented with photos, video and infographics when possible.
- Apply best practices – including ADA accessibility and user-focused design – for web-based and other digital communications.
- Use social media platforms and other digital communications or publications to amplify information on the court's website.

- Actively track and analyze the court's social media accounts to determine the reach and effectiveness of the court's social media posts and gain insight into the public perception of the court.
- Actively track and analyze social media platforms for mentions, hashtags and keywords regarding the court, its judges or other leaders, cases pending, and matters affecting the administration of justice to determine how the court system is being portrayed or perceived by the public. This also provides an opportunity to determine whether there are inaccurate statements warranting response, and whether there are security concerns or other issues to be brought to the attention of court leaders.
- Tailor print publications to specific audiences (e.g., school children, lawyers, the media) in the choice of content, language, and writing style.
- Be familiar with effective graphic and information design principles, publishing tools, processes and timelines. Some roles may require the ability to create photographs, videos or digital designs.

Governmental Relations

Maintaining positive relationships with other branches of government is essential to public service. Court communicators can provide timely information about court activities and major issues and needs affecting courts and their users. Related competencies may include:

- Develop educational programs for state or local elected officials and other government leaders.
- Identify key lawmakers and relevant interest groups.
- Develop consistent messaging for budgeting and other key legislative goals and use media relations and internal and external communications as appropriate to support those goals.
- Train judges and other court leaders to discuss budget and other legislative issues effectively.
- Compile editorials and news articles to track public perception of the court's budget and key legislative issues.