

Janet A. Lebson

Committed to being of service

Profile

Versatile public relations strategist guided by the belief that authentic, on-going, two-way communications are essential for cultivating and sustaining the productive relationships every organization needs to be successful. Demonstrable accomplishments in the public and private sectors and at the local, state, and national levels.

Specialties

- Leadership Support:** Providing strategic counsel and planning, speechwriting, ghost-writing, and messaging for defining an inspirational vision, mobilizing others operationally, vitalizing organizational culture, and managing through crises and change.
- Relations-building:** Employing proactive, incremental, two-way communications—internally and with strategic partners—that build influential networks for collective impact. This includes relations-building with Congress, journalists, non-profit partners, businesses, and local, state, federal, and American Indian tribal governments.
- Persuasive Writing:** Creating compelling content that can be adapted for multiple audiences, formats, and purposes, and explaining the rationale for complex policies and programs for more effective collaboration and strategic outcomes.

Experience

- 5/12 – 7/17,
2/05 – 4/10 **Communications Consultant**
Vancouver, Washington
- 4/10 – 4/12 **Public Affairs Specialist**
U.S. Department of the Interior, Portland, Oregon
- 4/02 – 8/04 **Director of Communications**
American Sportfishing Association, Alexandria, Virginia
- 5/98 – 4/02 **Communications Team Leader**
U.S. Department of the Interior, Arlington, Virginia
- 10/95 – 5/98 **Public Affairs Specialist**
U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC

Education

B.S. English and American Literature and Language and Political Science
Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI

Institute on Political Journalism, The Fund for American Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, DC

Highlights and References

Communications Consultant

A full client list and references can be provided

Highlights:

- To help launch a new nationwide collaborative conservation initiative for a federal agency, developed a communications strategy for leveraging public and private resources to target areas where fisheries are in the most trouble. Wrote news releases, opinion-editorials, speeches, and e-newsletters to keep participants and policy-makers well informed and engaged in the process of establishing habitat focus areas for partners' collective investments.
- To cultivate a common understanding of the future direction of a national trade association, developed a narrative journey of its 80-year evolution and priorities for growth. Strategically, this commemorative album was designed to maximize the opportunity of the milestone anniversary to build more member trust and activism, productive relationships with partners, and influence with public policy-makers. Weaving together the significance of historical milestones, accomplishments, and current programs, it created an inspiring vision for the future and effective pathways for progress.
- To help a startup business maximize its appeal, developed all new identity messaging, marketing materials, and promotional strategies. This effort included fully revamping all website content and producing a complete product catalog. Also earned media coverage in leading trade publications' new product sections and developed a promotional strategy and full press kit to attract media and buyers for the company's debut at a major international trade show, resulting in significant earned media coverage as well as increased sales.

Public Affairs Specialist, U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Supervisor: Paul Henson, State Supervisor, Portland, OR Field Office; [REDACTED]

Highlights:

- Served as an agency spokesperson and designated lead for public relations and communications on high-profile, politically controversial policies in the State of Oregon leading up to the 2012 election. Served as primary point-of-contact for coordination among partners at the local, regional, and national levels within the Interior Department, other state and federal agencies, and American Indian tribal governments.
- Led Congressional relations with Oregon members and district staff, including ongoing communications on major policy announcements, organizing policy briefings, and developing comprehensive briefing materials.
- Led media relations, including ongoing communications with print and broadcast media throughout the State of Oregon; serving as agency spokesperson; generating news and feature coverage; arranging press conferences, editorial boards, and leadership interviews; and developing comprehensive website content on high profile issues to support journalists.

Director of Communications, American Sportfishing Association

Supervisor: Mike Nussman, President & CEO (ret); c/ [REDACTED]

Highlights:

- Served as one of four directors and as strategic adviser and speechwriter for the President & CEO and chairman of the Board of Directors. Supported the President & CEO in his relations-building with the Board, association members, and partners, with a special focus on increasing involvement in Congressional advocacy for stronger influence on public policy affecting member businesses.
- Collaborated with other directors to develop comprehensive, strategic promotional plans for growing membership, revenue, and attendance in 4 major annual events (an international trade show, membership conference, Capitol Hill reception, and National Fishing Week kickoff on the National Mall). These efforts resulted in a 50% increase in membership and 40% increase in revenue.
- Developed professional branding and messaging, and a suite of cohesive communications products and content, to restore positive member relations, expand awareness of core programs and services, and increase member involvement in Congressional advocacy. Entirely revamped the content and design of the website, digital and print newsletters, brochures, fact sheets, and exhibits. Developed all new promotional materials to improve fundraising for the association's two non-profit foundations.

Communications Team Leader, U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Supervisor: Jim Kurth, Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System (ret); [REDACTED]

Highlights:

- Served as strategic adviser and speechwriter for agency and Interior Department leadership. Hired and managed a team of 5 professionals and oversaw the communications budget, including a \$750,000 contract with a PR firm for carrying out a major communications initiative (described below). Coordinated a team of outreach specialists from across the country. Developed comprehensive outreach plans for major legislation and policy announcements. Served on a national steering committee to produce the National Wildlife Refuge System's first-ever national conference and associated national strategic plan.
- Led the development, coordination, and implementation of a multi-million-dollar communications initiative—a “Centennial Campaign” tied to the National Wildlife Refuge System's 100th anniversary—the largest the agency has undertaken. Built upon the goals of a national strategic plan, the campaign increased visibility, expanded strategic partnerships, and ultimately helped garner a \$50 million historic funding increase from Congress.
- Strategically aligned the Centennial Campaign with efforts of 20+ national non-profit conservation/outdoor recreation organizations and hundreds of grassroots “Friends” groups nationwide advocating for more investments from Congress. Developed Congressional testimony and outreach strategies to shepherd key Centennial-related legislation through the executive branch and legislative committees necessary to ensure its passage.

Public Affairs Specialist, U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Supervisor: *Phil Million, Chief, Public Affairs (ret); c/ [REDACTED]*

Highlights:

- Served as an agency spokesperson and handled media relations for a variety of high-profile, controversial programs and issues related to fisheries and migratory bird conservation, national wildlife refuges, environmental contamination, and endangered species recovery. Generated news and feature coverage and organized a strong agency presence at national media conferences. Arranged press conferences and interviews for the Interior Department Secretary and agency director, and managed logistics (and accompanied them) for their travel and appearances.
- Developed press kits, fact and tip sheets, print and video public service announcements, raw footage, and other materials to support media and Congressional outreach. These included an endangered species fact sheet series, a key element of a broad, partner-driven initiative to foster support for the Endangered Species Act when it was pending reauthorization in Congress. Wrote speeches, talking points, and briefings materials for agency and Interior Department leadership. Served as editor of the agency's national newsletter for employees and partners.
- Served as designated agency representative on public-private partner coalitions related to reauthorization of major environmental laws, such as the Clean Water Act and Superfund, and outdoor recreation initiatives.

Volunteer Experience

- Member, Board of Directors, and Chair, External Affairs Committee, Foundations Preschool, Ann Arbor MI
- Ann Arbor, MI Citizens Academy graduate, Ready Ann Arbor training certified
- Communications support for an Ann Arbor, MI City Council Member to help with issues such as affordable housing and Food Gatherers initiatives
- Welcome center leader, Back Door Food Pantry, Ann Arbor, MI
- Food re-packer, Clark County Food Bank, Vancouver, WA
- Server, Daywatch homeless center operated by First Presbyterian Church, Portland, OR
- Commissioned Stephen Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Portland, OR

Other References

Jim Martin, Director, Berkley Conservation Institute (ret), Pure Fishing, Inc.;
c/ [REDACTED] (Pacific Time) [REDACTED]

Tom Sadler, Deputy Director, Marine Fish Conservation Network and Former Executive Director, Outdoor Writers Association of America; [REDACTED]

Eric Mortenson, Journalist, Portland *Oregonian* and Salem *Capital Press* (ret); c/ [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Janet A. Lebson

2675 Devonshire Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48104

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October 25, 2020

Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission
Michigan Secretary of State's Office
430 W. Allegan Street
Richard H. Austin Building - 4th Floor
Lansing, MI 48918

Dear Members of the Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission:

I am delighted to introduce myself for your consideration as the Communications and Outreach Director for the State of Michigan Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission. I grew up and graduated from college in Michigan before pursuing my communications career in the federal government. From Washington, DC, to the Pacific Northwest and now back to my native Ann Arbor, I have been preparing for an opportunity like this one. In carefully reviewing the qualifications described, I understand you're seeking a seasoned professional who can hit the ground running in these particular areas:

Media relations: I am a natural relations-builder with abundant interpersonal energy, discretion, and tact. I invest in ongoing engagement with journalists to build trust and understanding of complex public policy. As a routine part of my positions I've served as an agency spokesperson managing proactive and responsive media relations, including on highly controversial, time-sensitive issues. I am adept at organizing press conferences and briefings, arranging editorial board meetings and interviews for leaders, and helping leaders prepare for all of the above. I've routinely written news releases, media advisories, and specialized digital and print material for journalists.

Outreach Strategy: I am a holistic thinker and meticulous planner, developing strategies that identify target audiences, core messaging, and the best delivery tools to build public understanding and engagement—all with a laser focus on furthering strategic goals. It was a routine part of my previous positions to develop comprehensive outreach plans for all major policy announcements. In addition to journalists, these strategies facilitated engagement with Members of Congress, government partners, and NGO's representing major constituencies.

Content Creation: I embrace the challenge of translating technical information into substance that resonates—what I like to think of as “spinning straw into gold.” Organizations that can clearly explain who they are, what they do, and why it matters are much more likely to accomplish everything else they set out to do. I am adept at distilling complex information and transforming it into compelling content that's highly adaptable for different formats, audiences, and purposes. This includes routinely writing speeches and talking points for leaders as well as ghost-writing. All of my positions have required developing a spectrum of communications tools from start to finish and making sure they are integrated for maximum impact.

Thank you for your consideration of my application as you evaluate candidates for this important position. I would consider it a privilege to become a public servant once again and dedicate my expertise to help update and refine citizen representation in the great State of Michigan!

Sincerely,
Janet A. Lebson

Supplemental Questions:

1. How many years of professional experience do you have in communications, public relations, and media relations?

- 10 or more years

2. Describe your experience working in an executive level position.

In four positions I have fulfilled executive-level responsibilities:

Director of Communications: Served as one of four directors and as strategic adviser for the President & CEO. Set priorities and managed the budget for the communications program. Developed the full organizational 5-year strategic plan, synthesizing input from other directors, the President & CEO, and Board of Directors.

As Public Affairs Specialist: In my most recent Public Affairs position, served on the management team and as the sole communications professional for a staff of 60 people. Led communications on major forest management-related policy coordinated at the state, regional, and national levels.

Communications Team Leader: Hired and managed a team of five professionals and oversaw the budget and administration for the communications program, including a \$750,000 PR firm contract. Led a nationwide public relations campaign.

Communications Consultant: Operated my own business successfully for 10 years.

3. Describe your approach to communication strategy and development, and how you have implemented this approach in your current/previous position.

I use these steps to guide communications strategy development (I will explain a government approach):

- Define desired results. This would typically relate to engagement and relations-building with certain constituencies and partners to:
 - 1) ensure those who will be affected by a public policy or program are engaged proactively and in an on-going way,
 - 2) prepare for predictable public reactions (not just reactions from citizens but also Members of Congress, media, partners, etc. who influence the public),
 - 3) prevent or minimize obstacles to the successful implementation of the policy/program, and
 - 4) maximize coordination that helps facilitate effective implementation of the policy/program.
- Identify target audiences—those that would be key to accomplishing 1-4 above.
- Develop core messaging. This starts with organizing relevant information, outlining just the basic facts at this stage (wordsmithing comes later when communications tools are fully developed), including background information that prompted the policy/program. Core messaging should give context and meaning to those basic facts.

- Identify the best communications tools and venues for conveying core messages to the target audiences. In government, there is the added obligation to go beyond tools that reach target audiences to also ensure information is accessible to the masses.
- Include a task timeline—who is doing what and when—and budget considerations.
- Develop full content and all the various communications tools with core messaging as the basis. Two evaluative questions I use along the way:
 - 1) Does this clearly explain the rationale for policy/programmatic decisions? and
 - 2) Does this demonstrate awareness of those who will be affected and how?
- If a communications effort is coordinated internally, its development would be, too. Once it's done, ensure the strategy is shared appropriately so everyone involved can “sing from the same sheet of music.” Leaders and anyone else who will serve as a spokesperson or “subject matter expert explainer” would be engaged early on in developing core messaging.
- Later, evaluate the strategy to reinforce lessons learned for continuous improvement.

Good strategy development has important operational side effects in promoting effective coordination among everyone involved and helping to manage workloads efficiently.

4. How many years of experience do you have developing strategic communications and outreach programs, including for diverse set of stakeholders and constituencies?

- 10 or more years

5. Describe your experience with community-level engagement, outreach and education.

There is one experience in particular that taught me universal lessons about community engagement (and greatly influences my answer to Question #3). A public meeting in rural Missouri became so contentious that we had to enlist undercover law enforcement as a precaution. Radio talk shows had stoked fears among local farmers who thought the government was going to take over their land. We later learned this was part of a sophisticated, nationally organized effort to undermine public land acquisition and promote anti-government views.

We quickly realized the perceptions we were dealing with were much broader than our proposal. Many of the farmers did not distinguish between various government entities, so we were hearing concerns related to several other agencies' actions as well. Another challenge was many of them could not read, so our written “take-home” materials were of no use. Fortunately, we had a video, but our face-to-face interaction was what made the most difference.

We found the best way to build trust and understanding was by simply listening to the farmers' concerns and genuinely seeking to understand them. I focused on listening carefully to the leader of the group, who shared her views on many different government conspiracies because to her, the proposal was just a piece of a much larger threat.

By paying attention, showing respect, validating feelings, and responding without defensiveness or bureaucratic language, we were able to foster a basis of trust with the farmers, and several of them eventually supported the proposal once they understood it was about conserving the nearby river and they wouldn't lose land that had been in their families for generations. We considered this meeting a successful first step in building “good neighbor” relationships with the farmers since we had established common ground as fellow land stewards and committed to working together.