6.7 Communication and Public Relations

Internal and external communication initiatives require constant effort and attention in the complex ERC structure. Participating individuals are geographically disbursed and they often have differing loyalties and priorities. Consensus building takes considerable time and effort, but is essential to realizing the center's vision. There are many electronic tools available to facilitate communication, but there is no substitute for "in-person" interactions. Research retreats, industrial meetings, advisory board meetings, budget conferences, and the annual Site Reviews all offer opportunities to solidify the team.

Tip: Consider including staff from your business or sponsored program office at some of these events so they can develop a personal connection and investment in the center's success.

Public relations are important as the center works to build an industrial membership program and procure additional funding to support the mission. Centers do vary considerably in how they view publicity. Some desire maximum exposure, while others find these activities to be a drain on time and resources. Strike the right balance, develop a policy, and readdress it as the center evolves.

Key Considerations

Technical and graphic design expertise is required. Look to individuals on the ERC team, in the department, college, institution, or industry consortium, or external vendors to meet the needs of the center. Students can be an excellent resource.

Publications reflect the high standards of the center. Take the time up-front to design a professional logo, slide template, and web site.

Develop a website that will serve the ERC participants, industrial partners, other researchers and professionals, potential sponsors, and the general public as well. Review the websites of other ERCs at the Engineering Research Centers Association site. http://erc-assoc.org .

Create a communications team to oversee publications and posters and contribute editorial feedback. Some centers work with individuals from advisory boards to add a professional perspective.

Be sure to include the appropriate NSF acknowledgement language on all publications. Educate all ERC participants and provide easy access to sample language for this purpose.

Purchase camera equipment (video and still) to document events and activities. Create a central archive for documents, photos, and video footage. Institutional shared space may be available or explore options such as Google Sites, Google Groups, or Picasa.

Brochures, newsletters, fact sheets, pop-up banners, and stands can all be useful for the ERC. Some centers also prepare an executive summary version of the Annual Report to use for marketing purposes. Keep in mind that producing a newsletter or other printed materials can be a time-intensive activity. Make realistic staffing plans and periodically evaluate the cost-effectiveness of these efforts, as this will change over the life of the center.

Recruitment of companies, students, and sponsors is more successful if the entire team is aware of and supportive of these activities. Target audiences for public relations materials might include:

1.
   Companies, including prospective members

2.
   Prospective students and ERC alumni

3.

National Science Foundation and other federal agencies

4.
   State legislators and personnel working on economic development

5.
   Partnering university VIPs and participating departments

6.
   External universities

7.
   Other ERCs

8.
   Local and national press

9.
   National legislators, the general U.S. public, and international interests.

Maintain a Calendar of meetings and events online and make sure that key participants from each institution can easily update the schedule.

Connect with individuals from the news office at each institution in order to present a cohesive message and to be able to quickly respond to breaking news and events.

Facilitate virtual meetings with video or teleconferencing capability. There are many low- or no-cost options available such as:

- [Free Conference](#) – conference calling

- [Google hangouts](#) – video, voice conversations

- [Cisco WebEx](#) – meetings, webinars

- [Citrix GoToMeeting](#) – meetings, webinars

Work toward use of a common language. Use the ERCWeb Glossary and take every opportunity to educate all participants on key definitions.

Consistently use the appropriate qualifier for the word "**Year**" – Reporting Year, Award Year, Calendar Year, Federal, State and Institutional Fiscal Year, Prior Year, Future Year.

Consistently use the appropriate qualifier for the word "**Tables**" –NSF Tables, ERCWeb Tables, Microsoft Word Tables.

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