Communicating with young people

A short report on how young people communicate, what works and how youth workers can best communicate with young people

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How young people communicate today is different from even 5 or 10 years ago. Those working with young people (statutory and voluntary, churches, uniformed groups) need to communicate with young people and whilst there are more tools than ever there is also a lot more information. Communicating what young people want to know in a way that they will receive it is increasingly challenging. Funded by St. John’s Hospital Bath YFC has conducted some research with about 25 different young people into how young people communicate and what they want to know. I hope the findings of this research will inform youth work agencies about how young people communicate, how they want to be communicated with and give some indication of what they want to know.

1. Research Process

1. Write planning document
2. Youth participation group work sessions to address the question “How can youth organisations best communicate with young people?” within different group work formats
3. Email (survey monkey questionnaire) to young people and those who work with young people to see what they find works best (youth workers and agencies)
4. Write report up – limit to 5-6 sides of A4 if possible so that it is actually read!
5. Share findings with youth organisations / youth workers
6. Pull together a focus group to present the report – Young Leaders and other young people who feel able to discuss the issues
7. Use the findings and applications of the report to inform the development of the next Bath YFC strategy

A word about how the findings have been reported

There were lots of thoughts and ideas highlighted by those who took part in the discussions and online questionnaire. I have tried to group some of the comments made. To help show where there were particular themes I have increased the font size of words or issues that were highlighted more often. I have used font size 11 for the standard text, font size 13 where something was mentioned a couple of times and font size 16 when something was mentioned over three times. I hope this approach will give the reader the opportunity to either read the details or simply scan the report to gain understanding of the issues raised by young people and their responses to the questions asked.
2. What young people said about communication (focus groups)

The first part of this analysis will focus on the response of young people through the group work.

The discussion based sessions highlighted the following themes and thoughts:

Mediums of communication used by young people

Text, Facebook (event pages), Twitter, email (not all but more and more on Twitter), word of mouth, skype

Challenges for communication

“You only know about things if someone else goes”, so many different mediums, spam on email, projects are bit ‘hidden’ on the website e.g. Motus Dance, young people want enough notice (min 4 days), ‘who is it from?’ – must be someone you trust, flyers do not work, not all young people have Facebook and Twitter, too much information, unclear, wrong place

What do young people want to know about?

What is on, charity events, interesting talks/events, not just obvious youth things, things to get involved in, key information (what, when, where)

What could youth workers / Bath YFC could do to communicate better?

Posters (in school toilets!), videos for young people (could be played in assemblies, have data collection forms which invite young people at the beginning of each to give email, phone, facebook page etc, flash mobs, email subject line that is clear and grabs attention, clear, simple emails with right information, must be relevant (not just blanket emails – young people discerning what to look at and what not to), easy, clear

3. What young people said about communication (online survey)

Feedback from Survey Monkey questionnaire with young people is set out below. All those who responded said they are in regular contact with a local youth worker

How do you communicate with others?

Face to face, text, social networks

What things do you want to know about as a young person?

Life issues, housing, jobs, benefits, relationships, how to get on in the world, opportunities, what Bath YFC is about
Where do you go for this information, advice and guidance?

Internet, job seekers, friends, older siblings, youth workers, social networks, school

When asked about what youth workers are communicating with them the respondents two broad categories; information and things about life. All respondents felt that the youth workers communicated very well. When asked what poor communication looked like respondents wrote words like ‘lecturing’, ‘not listening’, ‘not including everyone in the discussion’, not replying to questions within 12-24 hours or not updating them on things that are happening, when “it makes you feel your questions aren’t important”.

When asked about what makes good communication the principles that young people highlighted included were, friendly, everyone included, asking people for ideas and making sure they understand, regular updates (on social networking sites), when they respond to worries quickly, good eye contact and body language.

4. What the youth workers thought (online survey)

We also set up a questionnaire for youth workers and their responses are summarised below.

What sort of information, advice and guidance do you try to communicate with young people?

Health, finance, housing, relationships, education, events and activities, prayer, values, faith matters

How do you communicate information advice and guidance (IAG) with young people you work with?

Flyers, websites and face to face, posters, Facebook, Twitter, text, email, depends on what is being communicated

What has worked well in communication IAG with young people?

Face to face, text, Facebook, youth work sessions, story-telling. Youth workers went on to say that communication that has not worked well is use of phone, one person wondered whether young people use email or just have an address so that they can access other things on the internet, another youth worker commented that communicating during holidays has been difficult with some young people not on social networking sites.

What could help you communicating information, advice and guidance better?

Some responses to this question focused on communicating with young people in a youth work session context and one person highlighted the challenge of technology (mobile phones) which can be a distraction. However regarding how we communicate, one worker commented that understanding how young people want to be contacted would be good (hopefully this research will
go some way to answering that) and another worker highlighted the needs to be able to communicate cheaply or free.

Other useful comments from youth workers were, “It’s about getting the right information in the right medium, and realising that different media may need to be used at different times and for different types of information and that this may change...”

“YP tend to forget appointments you need to work with them and walk alongside rather than be controlling or punishing”
4. A brief conclusion

I am not going to offer in depth analysis but rather have chosen to emphasise certain responses because of how frequently the theme or issue was raised. My hope by using this approach is that it will allow those working with young people to draw their own conclusions, think about their own response to what has been raised and apply their own solutions to the challenge of communication within their context. I will however offer some summary reflections of what I believe the research shows as the critical issues when communicating with young people.

- Young people want to be communicated with
- Young people want to know about relevant events and activities and those things that address the issues they are tackling
- Young people are very inter-connected and with social networking they are in ‘constant communication’
- Young people use lots of different mediums to communicate
- Young people receive lots of information some they want and lots they don’t
- Texting is very useful for reminders and information
- Trusting the source of information will mean young people are more likely to look at it
- Face to face remains vitally important
- Those working with young people must communicate clearly, simply and concisely with young people
- Information must be specific with just what needs to be said
- Mass produced generic communication tools such as flyers or posters do not really work unless placed somewhere young people have to read such as back of the toilet door
- Some communication tools are more effective than others and those working with young people should be flexible in approach and be prepared to use a variety of tools to communicate the message

5. What next?

I will present this information to young people and invite them to comment on the findings and help us find a way forward in terms of developing how Bath YFC communicates with young people. Furthermore I will invite young people to consider applications for the learning in helping Bath YFC fulfil its vision and mission.

This research around communicating with young people will also be shared with youth workers locally and nationally using local and national networks within which Bath YFC is a part.