
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CASE STUDY

PEACE NOT GUNS

Turning a public-safety imperative into
a sustained platform for community action

A communications and public-affairs framework supporting violence prevention, resident engagement, coalition building, and policy dialogue in Philadelphia.

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01 THE MANDATE

Communicating urgency. Sustaining trust.

Peace Not Guns was founded by Kenyatta Johnson in 1998 following the murder of his cousin. Its purpose—preventing violence through education, constructive alternatives for young people, and sustained community involvement—required communications that could connect personal loss, public policy, and neighborhood action.

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The assignment was bigger than publicity. It was to help turn a deeply personal mission into a clear, credible, and actionable public narrative.

THE COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE

Address a complex and emotionally charged issue with urgency and empathy—without reducing the work to a single event, headline, or enforcement-only message.

THE PUBLIC-AFFAIRS NEED

Connect residents, schools, faith leaders, community organizations, elected officials, and media around a common message: prevention requires coordinated and sustained action.

BURGESS’S MANDATE

Lead communications supporting the initiative: shape messaging, elevate the Councilmember’s voice, coordinate media and stakeholder communications, and frame community engagement within the broader policy conversation.

STRATEGIC PRINCIPLE

Treat gun violence as both a public-health emergency and a communications challenge requiring trusted messengers, accurate information, resident participation, and disciplined executive leadership.

02 STRATEGY AND EXECUTION

An integrated communications architecture

The work aligned communications, public affairs, and community engagement so that every channel reinforced a consistent message of prevention, partnership, and shared responsibility.

1 NARRATIVE & EXECUTIVE MESSAGING

Translated a complex policy and public-safety agenda into accessible messages for residents, partners, media, and public officials. Positioned the Councilmember as both an advocate and a convener.

2 MEDIA RELATIONS & VISIBILITY

Developed press materials, interview framing, event messaging, and story opportunities that elevated the initiative while keeping community voices and the human consequences of violence at the center.

3 COMMUNITY & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Supported town halls, forums, rallies, and community conversations involving residents, youth-serving institutions, faith communities, grassroots organizations, and public-sector partners.

4 CRISIS & ISSUE COMMUNICATIONS

Prepared timely, sensitive responses following incidents of violence; supported spokesperson readiness; and maintained disciplined language suitable for moments of grief, urgency, and heightened public scrutiny.

03 IMPACT AND LEADERSHIP VALUE

Building communications infrastructure for sustained action

The value of the work was not a claim that communications alone could end gun violence. It was the creation of a communications framework that helped the initiative remain visible, understandable, community-centered, and connected to policy and public leadership.

PUBLIC NARRATIVE

Strengthened a recognizable message that linked prevention, peace, youth opportunity, and community responsibility.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Created multiple entry points for residents and institutional partners to participate in dialogue and action.

EXECUTIVE POSITIONING

Elevated the Councilmember’s long-term commitment while aligning public statements, events, media, and policy priorities.

WHAT THIS CASE STUDY DEMONSTRATES

- Strategic communications in a high-stakes environment
- Public affairs and coalition-oriented messaging
- Executive communications and spokesperson preparation
- Community engagement rooted in trust and lived experience

ENDURING RELEVANCE

Peace Not Guns remains part of Kenyatta Johnson’s public-safety leadership—evidence that the central narrative has continued beyond a single campaign or news cycle.

Context sources: Philadelphia City Council biography and Special Committee on Gun Violence Prevention; City of Philadelphia FY2025 budget announcement.

Philadelphia City Council

Gun Violence Prevention Committee

City of Philadelphia