
CASE STUDY

INDIANAPOLIS AIRPORT AUTHORITY



PRESENTED BY
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ABOUT THE INDIANAPOLIS AIRPORT AUTHORITY



Indianapolis Airport Authority (IAA) is a mid-sized international airport that has consistently ranked among the best in North America in traveler surveys. It moves millions of passengers a year and runs a substantial cargo operation alongside them — and it has built a reputation for doing both well.

Equally as important (but less publicized) is its record on sustainability and resilience. The IAA has invested in energy efficiency, on-site renewable generation, and infrastructure designed to run longer and cost less to operate. These savings appear in their operating budget, and the projects make the airport more durable when conditions turn against it.

THE CHALLENGE

The IAA had a capable communications department with a strong track record. The team produced the organization's promotional videos, milestone recaps, and event coverage, and they did that work well.

However, their sustainability director recognized a gap in how the organization told its sustainability and resilience story. While the department was skilled at promotional, celebratory and operational messaging, the sustainability story required a degree of nuance and sensitivity that fell outside their usual work, and in a conservative region, the wrong framing risked drawing backlash rather than support.

Specifically, the organization faced several communication challenges:

- The sustainability and resilience work was substantive and cost-saving, but describing it publicly risked the organization being labeled political in a region where that label carries consequences
- The narrative called for a long-form, emotionally resonant format that the communications team, accustomed to shorter promotional pieces, had never produced
- Internal messaging on the topic was inconsistent, leaving the organization without a unified way to talk about its own accomplishments

Compounding the difficulty was what the IAA stood to lose. Continued support from key stakeholders — including the regional energy provider, the state utility commission, the congressional delegation, the governor's office, and the airport's own customers — depended on sustained will for the work ahead, such as microgrid installation, solar and storage capacity, and other resilience projects. If the organization was perceived as too political, that support and the funding tied to it could erode.

In other words, without a way to tell its story that respected these sensitivities, the airport would continue to struggle to communicate its successes to the very audiences on whose backing it depended.

MY APPROACH

After learning about my work creating films and policy campaigns, the IAA's sustainability director approached me to produce a film about the organization's sustainability and resilience successes. He determined that a standard corporate video format was too superficial for the subject, lacking the emotional depth needed for a complicated story to resonate across different audiences that are sometimes at odds with each other.

Together, we decided that a documentary, rather than a conventional corporate video, would have the depth, level of sensitivity, and staying power the subject required, and we structured the engagement to work alongside the communications department rather than around it. While the project was an exercise in communications, it was commissioned by the sustainability office. The resulting framing needed to acknowledge the communications team's expertise, time constraints, and the fact that they had not produced a deliverable like this before. This secured buy-in from leadership and from the communications staff, who supported handing off the work.

MY APPROACH INCLUDED:

- **Documentary Production:** I produced a long-form film telling the story of the IAA's sustainability and resilience work, framed around efficiency, cost savings, and responsible stewardship of resources that worked toward achieving buy-in while navigating a politically sensitive issue.
- **Communications Consulting:** Throughout production, I worked closely with the communications staff, advising on how to frame sensitive stories, phrase difficult points, and structure interview questions to draw out effective responses.
- **Stakeholder-Aware Framing:** I shaped the narrative with the organization's full range of stakeholders in mind, keeping the messaging defensible across a diverse audience.
- **Capacity Building:** By involving the communications team directly in the process, the engagement helped them develop the skills to handle sensitive subjects on their own going forward.

THE RESULTS



THE ENGAGEMENT PRODUCED SEVERAL OUTCOMES:

- **A Completed Documentary:** The IAA received a finished film telling its sustainability and resilience story, suitable for use with internal and external audiences.
- **A Stronger Communications Team:** Through close collaboration during production, the communications staff developed a firmer grasp of the issues and sensitivities involved, leaving them better equipped to tell these stories themselves.
- **Improved Internal Alignment:** As the team's understanding deepened, the organization's internal messaging became more consistent, which in turn supported clearer, more unified communication with outside audiences.



KEY INSIGHTS

This project reinforced several lessons about communication work around contested topics:

- **Build Capacity, Not Just Deliverables:** A film can have a limited shelf life, but a communications team that has learned to handle a difficult subject continues to deliver value long after a single project ends.
- **Audience Comes First:** The same set of facts can land differently with different audiences. Doing the advance work of understanding what an audience fears, values, and assumes is what allows a story to connect meaningfully with their diverse needs.
- **Entry Determines Impact:** How an outside consultant enters an organization sets the limits of what is possible inside it. Acknowledging an existing team's expertise and constraints at the outset prevents the turf conflicts that can quietly derail a project.
- **Thoughtful Framing Overcomes Challenges:** Framed around efficiency, savings, and stewardship, a sustainability record that has been thoughtfully messaged can hold up through challenging conditions.

ABOUT ROGER SORKIN

I AM A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT...

...who specializes in helping organizations communicate effectively when business interests intersect with contested public issues like sustainability, climate, infrastructure, defense, public health, and more.

My work includes developing communication strategies, designing simulation exercises that prepare teams for high-stakes discussions, coaching executives on media and stakeholder engagement, and producing content and messaging that build narrative cohesion.

If you're facing communication challenges in a complex environment and need guidance or support, please send an email to roger@rogersorkin.com or check out www.rogersorkin.com to learn more about how I could be of assistance.

