

Public Information
Education

Public Information-
Citizen Education

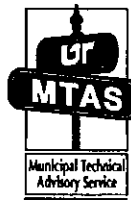
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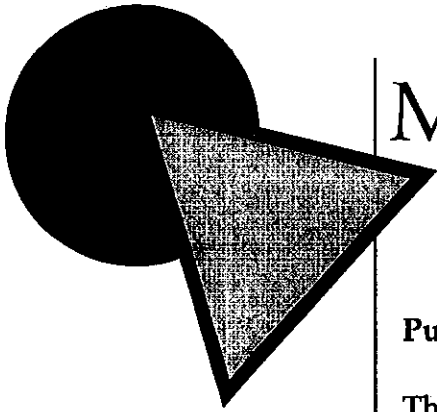
Municipal Communications - a model plan

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in cooperation with the
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Municipal Communications



Public Relations Objectives

The objective of a city communications program is:

- to inform the public of issues, policies, programs, ordinances, services, and other information;
- to promote an awareness, understanding, and involvement of the citizenry in the government process;
- to increase citizen input, feedback pertaining to city government processes, policies, and progress;
- to promote a consistent, continuous, and proactive message delivery system; and
- to promote a positive image that emphasizes a high quality of life.

Communication Outlets and Techniques

Community Relations

External Newsletter
Annual Report / City Directory
Town Meetings / Open Forums
Speakers' Bureau
Special Events
Direct Citizen Involvement
Newcomers Packet
City Web Page

Employee Relations

Internal Newsletter
Open Forums
Bulletin Boards
Employee Survey

Media Relations

News Releases
City Council Meetings





External Newsletter.

A citywide newsletter can serve as an excellent communications tool for keeping citizens informed. Although the media is also a means for getting your message to the public, there is a concern that the press doesn't always paint local government in a positive light. A citizen newsletter is an opportunity to tell your side of the story.

The design, frequency, and method for distribution can vary depending on available staff time and financial constraints. A word of caution — before taking on such a project, a certain level of commitment is required. The worst mistake you can make is to institute a newsletter and then let it slip through the cracks or down the priority list. That's why in the initial stages, it is better to start out slowly and increase distribution later, if needed.

Content

The newsletter should include information about upcoming events, progress reports of current construction projects, board proceedings, a calendar of events, comments from the Mayor, safety tips, and a feature story profiling a city employee.

Production & Design

One preferred production method that results in an appealing layout for little cost is to have a graphic designer produce the nameplate of the newsletter. With this method, even if the newsletter content is simply typed and photocopied, the nameplate lends a professional and eye-pleasing flair. The use of spot color can also improve the appearance of the newsletter and at a fairly reasonable price.

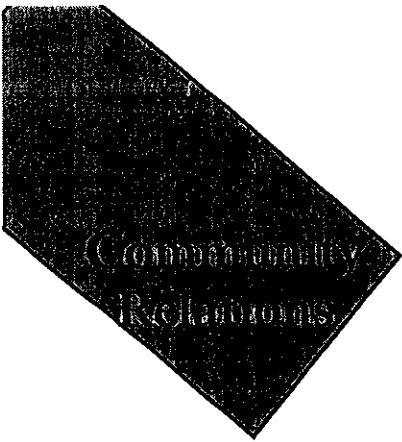
Cost

Any small printing business in town can handle the job. If the city has storage space available, order the paper in bulk and provide the printer with the paper and camera-ready artwork for each issue. But again, the cost will vary depending on paper stock, ink colors, the number of copies, etc.

Distribution

To ensure that all households receive the publication, direct mail is the best choice. However, it can also take a good-size chunk out of the city budget. The most economical way would be to "piggyback" the newsletter with some other mailing like the monthly water bill. Print extra copies for distribution in city hall, library, post office, and to hand out at any speaking engagements. In addition, most newspapers will stuff newsletters in the local paper for a fee per thousand, and it blankets the community well.





Annual Report/City Directory

Just like any other public or private organization, city governments have a responsibility to report what it does to its constituents. The annual report should be distributed as early in January as possible and include information about the budget, construction projects, department news, accomplishments and highlights, and goals for the upcoming year.

Newspaper Tabloid

Contract with newspaper to design, print, and possibly write the piece for no cost but the sale of ads. The newspaper may charge so much per thousand to insert in the paper and distribute. City would also pay for an overrun to have on hand to distribute the rest of the year as a PR piece for the city.

Calendar/Annual Report/City Directory

Several cities have gone to this format as a "catch all" public relations tool that has a long shelf life.

Estimated Cost:

11" x 17", folded in half, saddle stitch

12 - 15 black and white photographs

Black ink on 80 lb. text weight .80 per piece

plus one PMS color 1.00 per piece

Annual Report

16 pages, saddle stitch

8 - 12 black and white photographs

Black ink on 80 lb text weight .50 per piece

plus one PMS color .65 per piece

Other options to consider -

- Some cities have used boy scouts troops to distribute the annual report door-to-door and the city makes a contribution to the troops.
- Rather than try to distribute the annual report to all households, several cities have opted to scale back by only distributing the report to "key" contacts in the city (those citizens who are most involved in the community, serve on community boards, etc.) Plus have extra copies available at city hall, the library, etc.





Open Forums/Town meetings

Several cities have begun using neighborhood walks as a method to give their citizens the opportunity to engage in a one-on-one conversation with a city official. It's also a wonderful opportunity for positive publicity for the city. Make sure the media knows all about it. Suggest that the next time a reporter tag along. (This is also a great item to include in your newsletter.)

One word of caution — if citizens are presenting specific problems that they want addressed, someone from the city needs to make note of the request and have some method for reporting back to them on the progress. Otherwise, the entire purpose of the informal walks is being defeated.

In addition to the walks, schedule a couple of formal town meetings with specific meeting agendas. During the budget process is a good time to hold a town meeting to solicit citizen input, or after the budget is finalized to review it with your citizens. Other suggested times might be to announce any major construction projects, end-of-the-year reporting, results of a specific study or audit, etc.

Speakers' Bureau

A speakers' bureau is a popular and effective outreach program. The Rotary Club, League of Women Voters, Chamber of Commerce, garden and neighborhood associations, are always on the lookout for speakers. Start with just three or four employees, probably administrators, ready to handle speaking engagements. Then add more workers to the group based on their personality, ability to speak well, and "stage presence" — not just on their position with the city. Those in the bureau should be rehearsed at presenting a standard program, with some personal variations based on their job with the city. Information included in the annual report is a good place to start. Also, take the time to prepare slides or overheads that give an overview of city operations. (There are several software packages out now that are specifically for designing overheads — Microsoft Office, Windows '95, Freelance Graphics, etc.)

Special Events

Aside from the standard holiday sponsored events, such as Christmas Parades, Easter Egg Hunts, and Fourth of July celebrations, there are numerous events that would maximize exposure for the city for very little money.

Arbor Day - The city includes in its annual budget each year the cost of a new tree or a shrub to plant in a city park. This is a wonderful public relations tool. Not only is it great publicity, but the city is providing needed landscaping to a city park, which is a quality of life issue and an image builder for the city. The event could be coordinated with the city's elementary or middle school and involve city council members in the ceremony.





Student Government Programs

- An elementary school program that teaches fourth and fifth graders about city government, city services, council procedures, etc.
- Career Day for high school students that features the various job positions with the city, what type of education/training is involved, etc.

Direct Citizen Involvement

Some Tennessee cities have begun to rely on a core of volunteers to help coordinate various city events. Farragut, Brentwood, and Germantown have very successful volunteer programs that help coordinate recycling, city beautification and neighborhood cleanup efforts. In addition, Germantown has some 20 city committees that consist of citizens volunteering their time to serve on a board and provide citizen feedback. Citizen committees and commissions provide an opportunity for the city government to work directly with volunteer citizens in specific areas of interest. Members provide input to government affairs and act as ambassadors to other citizens. Feedback and citizen involvement helps ensure that the city is working in a direction the community's needs and expects.

Newcomers Packet

New residents receive packets of materials about the city when they sign up for water service. This can be coordinated with the Chamber of Commerce. In fact, they may already do this. If so, make city materials available to them for distribution, such as the most recent newsletter, an annual report, or calendar of events.

City Web Page

For local governments, homepages can be a very effective community communications device and should be viewed as an important tool in the communications bag. By making information and resources accessible 24-hours a day, usually in the user's home or office, city officials can use the homepage as convenient way to service residents. Government services can actually be delivered via the Internet. For example, a city homepage can allow citizens to request special event permits, parking permits, and job applications. Citizens can pay a water bill or parking fine interactively. Or, residents can search and read city ordinances and resolutions.

Police and Fire Department

A city's safety department can be a very effective and visible means for establishing contact with its residents. Cities throughout Tennessee use their fire and police departments as an extension of the city's outreach program. Some examples include:

- blood pressure screenings set up in public shopping malls conducted by city EMTs,
- fire safety presentations at the schools,
- DARE programs and DUI presentations at area high schools.
- a citizen police academy, and
- police "trading cards" targeted to elementary school children.



Good communications begins at home. Any public relations effort will be enhanced if employees are well informed of city operations, and are included in projects and promotions. Employees, if misinformed or disgruntled, can damage the city's credibility because of their close contact with citizens. Armed with facts, employees can continue the public relations effort in all sectors of the community, on or off the job.

There are several methods that can be used to keep employees informed, most of which can be accomplished by spending very little money.

Internal Newsletter

A "down and dirty" newsletter distributed each month in their pay check written for and by city employees. Some cities use a newsletter committee or put departmental secretaries in charge of reporting on their department.

Open Forums

A brown bag lunch, either quarterly or biannually, where employees bring their own lunch to a city park or some other city venue, and key staff people present information about upcoming projects or events. The lunches could also be planned for two different days in order to accommodate everyone's schedule and to make sure there are staff people still manning city hall. Invite council members as well to help with the team-building philosophy and to break down any stigmas that council members are "off-limits" to employees.

Bulletin Boards

Use and update bulletin boards on a regular basis with information about city events, employee benefits, positive articles about the city in the press, etc.

Council Action

Distribute a summary of council action to each employee the morning after council meetings. Such quick distribution makes employees feel part of the action — and they don't get caught off-guard at the supermarket when a citizen mentions a council activity. The summary should be short, bulleted items that simply highlight council happenings.

Employee Survey

Consider surveying employees to determine what type of information they would like to receive concerning city operations. Once key issues have been identified, it is easier to determine the best approach for communicating with them. Just by simply asking for their input is a positive step toward good employee relations.





Begin now building a rapport with the media representatives that cover the city regularly. It's a short-term, inexpensive project that will yield almost immediate results. Although the news media is not the only way to relate to the public, they are a major factor in helping citizens learn about what is happening in the local community.

News Releases

- Review the city's annual calendar and determine which of those events require media attention.
- News releases can provide background information, announce an upcoming event or issue a statement on a new development. Most releases should never be more than two pages. Generally, broadcast media do not need more than the basics, and if the print media want more details, they will ask.
- With no full-time staff member devoted to media relations, there's nothing wrong with just picking up the phone and calling reporters or news editors when something is going on in your city that's worth a story.

Board Meetings

Reporters get a majority of their stories about the city from happenings at or related to board meetings. Therefore, it is in the city's best interest if the reporters understand what's going on in those meetings. Reporters that cover the city regularly should receive the meeting packet just as council members do, and receive it in time to review the issues before the meeting. Make sure there is a place reserved for reporters to sit, where they can easily see and hear the council members speak. In addition, key staff people should be available after the meetings to answer any questions. Mistakes usually are made simply because the reporter didn't quite follow the action and could have used a little help interpreting it.

Meet with News Directors

If there is a specific issue that is particularly complex or controversial, schedule a meeting with the news director to go over the issues in more detail. A proactive approach with the media is always the best approach. It shows your willingness to work with the media and that you have nothing to hide.

