Local Government Association

Model Council Communications Plan and Guide

Draft Only

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Purpose of Document

The Model Communications Plan is intended to be of benefit for all South Australian Councils.

For some it may act as a useful checklist to assist you to ensure your Council is covering all identified communication bases. For other Councils the Plan can be used as a guide and implementation assistor.

The key to the success of the Plan will be consistency of usage. The more SA Councils that operate within these principles the more consistent the messages will be that are received around the State by residents and businesses.

The model Communication Plan is also intended as a guide, rather than a template (although it can be used effectively for both). It respects the individuality of Councils and their varying resident needs and habits.

Whether you use this plan as a checklist, a guide, a template or a model it is intended to assist rather than dictate so feel free to modify any elements to suit both your unique area and organisation, and your market.

The Benefits of Communication

Effective communication provides a strong foundation upon which Councils can more effectively develop and maintain their local neighbourhoods.

Research has shown that awareness of Council's services leads to stronger support and in many cases assistance.

If aligned with your operating goals and plans, effective communication can increase the speed at which you achieve these goals.

Effective communication with your community can also provide these benefits -

- Assists in building a positive reputation
- Strengthens and bonds relationships with stakeholders
- Generates community support and involvement
- Improves customer satisfaction levels
- Provides a platform of strength from which to manage any crisis
- Attracts business and residents to the area
- Improves staff morale and job satisfaction

Tangibly, good communication practice can reduce costs and increase community support.

All of which make the day-to-day activities and long term goals and aims easier to achieve.

Principles of Good Communication

The model Communications Plan has been developed based upon the principles of good communication, namely -

- Visibility
- Simplicity
- Repetition
- Value
- Variety
- Listening
- Consistency
- Evaluation

Visibility
To commence or maintain a strong two-way communication relationship with your stakeholders it is important that you are visible as much as possible. Visibility leads to recognition and acceptance plus it allows the community to see the breadth and value of your work.

Simplicity
The community is busy with many aspects of their lives whether at work or home. Communication must be simple and straight forward out of respect for their time.

Repetition
Wherever possible a repetitive schedule should be devised for message placement to ensure it receives community consideration. The more a message is repeated the wider it's audience will become.

Value
Ensuring a message has a reasonable level of value for the recipient is paramount to gain their attention and interest. As simple rule of thumb here is that Council operating machinations hold little value to the community but how those machinations affect the community hold a high level of value. Therefore, messages should be structured with the community effect as their foundation.

Variety
To ensure a message is received by the community at large it needs to be placed in a number of different communication vehicles. The more vehicles (website, newspapers, direct mail, On-hold phone messages etc etc) it appears in the wider its likely coverage will be.

Listening
Good (and effective) communication requires two parties - the giver and the receiver. If you send a message you must also expect to receive some form of response at times. It is important that feedback on all issues is encouraged and processed. Nothing will dampen the community's enthusiasm quicker than the believe they are not being listened to.

Principles of Good Communication (cont.)

Consistency
To build credibility and a positive reputation messages need to be consistent. If your messages are ALWAYS simple, hold a value for the recipient, encourage feedback and are placed in a variety of different places they will generate interest and earn respect at an increasing level each time they are placed.

Evaluation
The only accurate way of knowing if your communication is good or not is to evaluate its effectiveness (and the best way to do that is to set a goal for each one and then evaluate if it has been achieved)

Different Stakeholder Groups and Their Key Communication Needs

In any community a number of different stakeholder groups exist, all of whom probably have different communication needs and expectations.

Whilst it may not be possible to meet all of these it is important to ensure your Communication Plan has a good balance and understanding of who the groups are.

This Plan includes a 'Reach' matrix (see page 18) outlining some of the main stakeholder groups and which communication mediums will best meet their needs.

In addition to the different stakeholder groups, our own primary and secondary research* identified four key resident segments in local communities –

1 - Engaged and happy (have had good experiences with their Council and feel they are doing a good job)

2 - Young, inexperienced (are open minded but have low awareness of Council activities)

3 - Engaged but unhappy (have had bad experience with their Council which taints their opinion)

4 - Less engaged sceptics (sceptical about Councils generally. Don't feel they get value for money.

Residents tend to move within these segments, mainly in accordance with their interaction with Council. Good interactions promote positive opinions but bad interactions quickly creates dissatisfaction (and mainly irrespective of what may have happened in the past).

The research showed that, overall, residents were -

Satisfied with Council's asset management & services and facilities
Lack awareness of strategic directions of Councils
Dissatisfied with community consultation

The Model Communication Plan aims to overcome the communication dissatisfaction but cannot address the sizeable impact negative interactions have on resident opinions.

It is therefore important that in addition to reviewing how your Council rates with the principles of the model Plan (and making any necessary adjustments) consideration should also be made regarding customer service principles.

The research clearly outlined that communication cannot overcome interaction in regard to forming and influencing consumer opinions.

* The primary research conducted as part of the development of this model plan and guide can be accessed via the following link https://www.lga.sa.gov.au/goto/communicators

How the 'Local Government' Brand Impacts Your Council and Vice Versa

Although established under common legislation, each Council is a separate corporate entity with its own, name, logo, service profile and relationship with its community. However Councils recognise that there is a "Local Government" brand which impacts on Councils and which Councils impact.

This is particularly important in a State like SA where traditional media has continued to consolidate and centralise with less diversity. The impact of new global media such as social media has further integrated a Council brand with the wider Local Government brand.

SA Councils have asked the LGA to look at ways of improving consistency of messages to both help improve outcomes and to make efficiency savings across the sector. Improved consistency of message and approach will provide an ideal platform upon which individual Councils can generate greater support and assistance.

As in other activities the LGA is seeking to identify improved ways to support Councils in delivering consistent messages – but an individual Council retains the right and responsibility to determine whether such messages match its own priorities. We would expect and encourage Councils:

- to provide feedback to the LGA when sought (or at any time) to assist it to ensure key consistent messages remain relevant to all Councils;
- to assess key consistent messages proposed by the LGA for application locally (both for content and for cost savings) and only to vary or add to such messages where there appear to be local priorities at variance; and,
- if the Council determines to vary its key messages from those promoted by the LGA, to provide feedback to the LGA – which will assist in reviewing key messages for relevance.

The LGA will consult regularly with Councils on key State-wide messages and modify them as appropriate from time to time. The LGA is also seeking to collaborate with interstate Associations and the Australian Local Government Association to encourage greater consistency nationally.

It's in all of our interests to ...

generate greater understanding of and support for Council activities

increase community awareness of Council responsibilities

increase community interest in Council activities

improve community understanding of LG professionalism

An example of the sort of approach envisaged is the approach to promotion of 2010 Local Government elections in which three key messages: "Your Park", "Your Street" and "Your Library" featured across the State along with the slogan "Your neighbourhood means the World to You". These messages were developed in consultation with Councils and supplemented by some Councils in local delivery.

The closer that individual Council messages coincide with State-wide messages and with the experience of people as they use Council services – the greater understanding and awareness will be achieved.

The process your Council uses to improve its communication should incorporate an ongoing mechanism to consider for local use key messages developed by the LGA, and to provide feedback to the LGA on those key messages.

Communication Vehicles

What you say, how you say it and what you say it with all require equal consideration when trying to find the right balance between cost and effectiveness, consistency and repetition.

A further consideration is the impact communication can have and the fundamental requirement to ensure that you 'walk the talk'. A danger exists that your Council's words are louder than their actions. Such a situation would quickly deem communication ineffective and create a strong negative reputation that may take quite some time to heal.

To avoid such a situation it is imperative that communication is supported by high and consistent customer service standards. You may therefore want to review your customer service standards before commencement or as part of any communication program.

Another support consideration is 'visibility'. As a foundation it is good practice to ensure, where appropriate, that your activities are highly visible - telling your community about the good work you are doing on their behalf is a positive initiative but showing them your work in action is ultimately more powerful.

And remember, the whole of an organisation is responsible for communication and service standards.

A number of tried and tested communication vehicles exist for Local Government however the speed at which consumers are adopting new media requires constant consideration of available alternatives.

Evaluating the impact of vehicles used will provide the most accurate view of what return upon investment can be achieved by different methods.

It should be noted that different audiences will access and use different communication mediums. It should also be noted that different communities will respond to messages and mediums used in quite varied manners. Nevertheless here's a quick guide to each potential communication vehicle your Council may adopt -

Customer Service

Outline

All customer interactions (by any medium) communicate a powerful message. Done well the message is positive, done poorly and the message is negative and may then take some time and effort to adjust.

As no amount of communication can overcome poor customer service experiences it is important that high standards are set, monitored and maintained to support and communication activities, especially if the communication creates a community spotlight.

Strengths

Can create a strong level of community support (can even adjust negative attitudes or opinions)

Weaknesses

Needs to be constantly of a high level

Communication Vehicles (cont.)

Visibility

Outline

Creating community awareness of the work undertaken by the inclusion or addition of signage on Council equipment, vehicles, facilities etc. Note the message must extend beyond just a name or logo listing and include a statement of achievement (i.e. "This facility provided by and maintained by your XXX Council" etc)

Strengths

Can be portable and therefore changeable
Easy to know where and when to place
Can be manipulated to suit project status and available budgets

Weaknesses

Places Council workers 'on show' and therefore high customer service standards must be maintained
May generate additional enquiries or complaints from people previously unaware of Council's responsibility
Where signage is permanent the facility must be maintained to a high standard

Tangible Communication Vehicles

Websites

Outline
An easily located online presence that contains useful information and functionality for all market segments.

A good Council website should both provide information about Council, its services and the area it represents plus provide the ability for visitors to conduct Council business online (i.e. make payments, answer FAQs, book activities). It should also provide interaction opportunities.

Strengths
Can be regularly updated using internal resources.
Can be easily accessed by anyone, anytime.
Allows extensive information to be displayed.
Can reduce Council costs and resources (if well structured).

Weaknesses
Can be initially expensive.
Requires constant monitoring and updating.
Must be accurate at all times.

Newspaper Columns (advertorials)

Outline
Paid advertising space that is used to place editorial style messages - usually regularly.

Strengths
Allows Councils to structure the messages.
Cannot be adjusted by any third party.
Can access large readership numbers.
Is cost effective.

Weaknesses
May not achieve high readership levels.
Is surrounded by other messages demanding reader attention.

Annual Reports

Outline
A legislatively influenced printed summary of the year's activities, achievements and financial performance.

Strengths
Structured to a known format.
Can provide a comprehensive insight into Council and its operations.
Has wide appeal and knowledge
LGA preparation guidelines exist to assist production

Weaknesses
Expensive if done to a corporate standard
Little content flexibility
Offers limited tangible return on investment

Tangible Communication Vehicles (cont.)

Promotional Brochures

Outline
Printed information insights on a variety of topics.

Strengths
Is a familiar communication vehicle with the community
Flexible format choices
Easy to distribute
Wide market appeal
Can be inexpensive to produce

Weaknesses
No room for alteration once printed
Needs to be manually distributed
Has high competition for attention

Council Newspapers

Outline
Regular newspaper style publication distributed to residents

Strengths
Huge content flexibility
Allows Council to place content unedited
Provides income stream via advertising sales

Weaknesses
Can be costly to produce and distribute
Requires large amount of content and can be time consuming
Must meet some legal standards (i.e. advertising and editorial policy)
Content must be accurate and regularity achieved

Signage

Outline
Visual graphics created to display information (most notably, but not only, directional)

Strengths
Placement opportunities abound
High longevity with little maintenance needs
Can be placed at sites that other communication forms cannot access
Offer strong stand out and awareness levels

Weaknesses
Can have space limitations for messages
Can be expensive to replace/update

Tangible Communication Vehicles (cont.)

Community Notice Boards

Outline
An open noticeboard (which is often hard copy and/or electronic) that anyone can access within general guidelines

Strengths
Is reasonably self managed
Generates its own content

Weaknesses
Needs good profile locations (and quality content) to attract usage
Can be abused if not monitored and content may be seen as being Council endorsed

Sponsorship

Outline
A mutually beneficial, often commercial agreement between two parties

Strengths
Can be applied in almost any format
Benefits can represent good value for money
Often provides access to hard to locate niche markets

Weaknesses
Is often controlled by the other party (which can be open to abuse)
Can be difficult to evaluate (in which case don't pursue)

Events

Outline
Any activity that is open to community access (including online events)

Strengths
Strong interactivity opportunities
Places Council within the community

Weaknesses
Can be expensive
Reduces ability to manage interactions

Media Exposure (editorial)

Outline
Unpaid media exposure (sometimes driven by a Council, other times initiated by the media) of newsworthy stories

Strengths
Third party content (therefore often attracts greater interest and belief)
May provide access to large market (or small niche)
Low cost (although time and resources strain may be high)

Weaknesses
Content dictated by media outlet
Often info required within tight deadlines

Tangible Communication Vehicles (cont.)

Speeches

Outline
Public exposure and communication opportunity via spoken word to select audience.

Strengths
Message can be tightly managed
Portable (and often able to be repeated to several markets and in several other formats)
Can lead to additional media exposure

Weaknesses
Requires experienced and skilful (or trained) presenter
Is usually 'live' and therefore open to human error

New Media (Twitter, Facebook, Linked In etc)

Outline
Electronic media and social media forums that provide (usually online) exposure and message placement opportunities

Due to the fast moving and almost ever-changing structures of the new media outlets we suggest you refer to LGA circulars and guidelines (which can be found via the LGA website) for up-to-date new media usage guidelines.

Public Meetings

Outline
Formal or informal meetings that are open to the public

Strengths
Provides strong interaction opportunities
Often provide a barometer of the interest and opinions of the community on specific issues
Provide a good platform to gather feedback

Weaknesses
Can be hijacked by vocal minorities
Can be expensive and resource rich

Personal Contact

Outline
Any form of personal interaction between Council staff and representatives and the community

Strengths
Provides strong interaction opportunities
Allows issues to be (sometimes) immediately resolved
Has strong impact on community

Weaknesses
Requires skilful negotiation at times
Can be time consuming

Tangible Communication Vehicles (cont.)

Direct Mail

Outline
Bulk mailout of communication messages via hard copy or electronic means

Strengths
High exposure with minimal resource requirements
Can be quickly prepared and distributed (especially electronically)
Flexible message formats

Weaknesses
Often has low readership/response levels

Uniforms

Outline
Any consistent clothing or body 'art' that promotes Council or its operations

Strengths
Strong conversation starter
Large message application area
Has strong personal characteristics
Communicates with community and staff

Weaknesses
If used in traditional format only often (i.e. logo placement only) has low impact

Rate Notices (and Brochures)

Outline
Any form of promotional material included with rates notice mailout

Strengths
Provides access to all ratepayers
Provides a timely opportunity to outline how Council rates are used

Weaknesses
Is enclosed with a request for payment (the rate notice)
Can be criticised as propaganda

Vehicle Livery

Outline
Signage on Council vehicles

Strengths
Provides a mobile billboard (and therefore wide community exposure)
Operates when vehicle is exposed
Shows Council in action

Weaknesses
Can provide vandalism target
Sometimes criticised by the community as being 'indulgent'
Increases need for high customer service standards

Tangible Communication Vehicles (cont.)

On-Hold Phone Messages

Outline
Recorded phone messages played continuously when callers are placed on hold

Strengths
Utilises 'dead' contact time to communicate
Can be frequently updated
Message content managed by Council

Weaknesses
Content may date quickly
Can be repetitive
Generates increased frustration levels for disgruntled callers

Presentations

Outline
Any opportunity to address a group of people

Strengths
Message managed by presenter
Portable and flexible

Weaknesses
Requires experienced, skilled or trained personnel
Audience often limited by venue size/location

Displays

Outline
Visual representation of a message

Strengths
Content can be controlled
Portable and flexible

Weaknesses
Limited effect if not interactive
Can be expensive
May date quickly

Internal Communication Plan

Outline
A formal plan of approach addressing internal communications

Strengths
Provides a single focus and ready reference
Can generate greater consistency
Encourages wide usage/involvement
Improves evaluation accuracy

Weaknesses
Can be difficult to develop

Tangible Communication Vehicles (cont.)

Stationery

Outline
All letterhead, envelopes, business cards etc

Strengths
Has strong usage
Low cost message vehicle opportunity
Messages can be updated or rotated frequently
Existing material (probably underutilised)

Weaknesses
Any promotional message may get lost amongst other content
Content must be centrally controlled to avoid inconsistency or inaccuracy

Merchandise

Outline
Promotional items usually given away for everyday or frequent use that contain some form of owner branding or promotion

Strengths
Allows creativity
Longevity and strong discussion points
Message can be tailored to the item

Weaknesses
Can be expensive
message space sometimes limited

Positioning Statements

Outline
A consistent short statement that expresses a Council's personality and/or focus

Strengths
If used consistently can generate memorability
Can add personality to a Council's identity
Multiple placement opportunities

Weaknesses
Needs to meet the needs and expectations of many different market niches
If not professionally developed can taint Council's image

Selecting Communication Vehicles

The following two matrices aim to help guide Council staff on the most appropriate means of communicating with the community according to various target groups and circumstances.

What will be best for any particular future communication need will depend on specific communication requirements, objectives and budget.

Logic and commonsense should guide your choices, so consider these matrices as tools that *together* help provide a starting point.

Matrix 1: communication vehicle by type of issue

This matrix highlights appropriate communication by issue, where that issue can be considered:

- *'High impact – city wide'*, for example:
  - removal of a whole of city service
  - building of new sporting/cultural facility at considerable expense

- *'High impact – local area'*, for example:
  - removal of prominent trees in a street
  - removal or relocation of local playground/park
  - removal of service e.g. youth services
  - local street works or closure

- *'Low impact – city wide'*, for example:
  - improvements to city wide services
  - upgrade of regional park/facility
  - changes to customer services e.g. payment of rates, office hours
  - community events/celebrations

- *'Low impact – local area'*, for example:
  - improvements to local playground
  - local street or area upgrade
  - community building upgrades/introduction
  - small local events

'High impact' issues are usually associated with:

- significant impacts (real or perceived) on areas/issues of high value to communities
- the potential for high levels of controversy or conflict

'Low impact' issues are usually associated with low levels of controversy or conflict.

Matrix 1 - Vehicles

Vehicle	High impact – city wide	High impact – local area	Low impact – city wide	Low impact – local area
Website	**1**	**1**	**2**	**3**
Email	**2**	**2**	**3**	**3**
Newsletter	**2**	**2**	**2**	**3**
Direct mail campaign	**3**	**2**	**4**	**4**
Letterbox drop	**3**	**2**	**4**	**4**
Local press media column	**2**	**3**	**3**	**3**
Local press advertising	**3**	**4**	**5**	**5**
Media release	**3**	**3**	**3**	**3**
Create brochure	**3**	**5**	**4**	**5**
Noticeboard/s	**3**	**1**	**3**	**3**
Displays	**3**	**3**	**5**	**5**
Vehicle Signage	**5**	**5**	**5**	**5**
Signage	**3**	**3**	**3**	**3**
On-hold phone messaging	**3**	**5**	**3**	**5**
Personal contact	**1**	**1**	**2**	**2**
Events	**3**	**3**	**3**	**3**
Presentations	**2**	**2**	**4**	**4**
Public info sessions	**2**	**3**	**3**	**3**
Annual Report	**1**	**2**	**3**	**3**
Internal communication	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**

Legend
1 = Always
2 = Most situations
3 = Dependant on situation (issue/program/timing)
4 = Seldom
5 = Very seldom

Matrix 2: Reach
This matrix highlights more effective communication vehicles according to various target groups.

Matrix 2

Vehicle	Councillors	Management	Staff	Residents	Businesses	Media	State Govt	Federal Govt	Clubs/Assoc.
Website	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Email	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Newsletter	X	X	X	X	X				X
Direct mail campaign	X			X	X				X
Letterbox drop				X	X				
Local press media column	X			X					
Local press advertising	X			X					
Media release	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Create brochure				X	X		X	X	X
Noticeboard/s				X					X
Displays				X					
Vehicle Signage				X					
Signage				X					X
On-hold phone messaging	X			X					
Personal contact	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Events	X			X			X	X	X
Presentations	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Public info sessions	X			X					
Annual report	X	X	X						
Internal communication	X	X	X						
Local Government Association lobbying							X	X	

General Communication Guidelines

The following key guidelines will assist you with frequent and 'popular' Local Government communications -

Community consultation*

The key is to provide incentives for 'attendance/involvement' and restrict communication vehicles used to those that have strong local circulation to ensure you reach your target market.

Your message should have a strong message about the benefits of attendance/involvement and feedback/input methods must be simple to access and easy to complete. They should also be as convenient as possible for the community.

If possible include an exclusive that can only be accessed at the 'meeting' or via the consultation process.

* See also LGA the Council Community Consultation Guidelines on the LGA website http://www.lga.sa.gov.au/goto/engage

Publicising events

Include specific event segments of traditional and new media where people are looking for 'things to do'.

Ensure the fundamental event details are clear, accurate and prominent (date, time, location etc).

Run your communication campaign with plenty of time for people to consider attendance and to overcome the probability of being unavailable. Sometimes it may be useful to run two campaigns - one to generate initial interest and commitment and the next to secure attendance.

Announcing new services

Frequency of message placement is important to allow awareness to grow. Also ensure that users of the new services are encouraged to generate word of mouth support.

If the service has a key market segment focus attention on communication vehicles that can access that segment.

Complaints management

Ensure you have a clear policy of dealing with complaints and make it easily accessible to everyone.

Train staff in dealing with complaints and the often emotion charged interactions that occur.

Being practical yet fair and firm is crucial.

Council elections

As this 'event' is managed by stringent legislation refer to that part of the LG Act and LG (Elections) Act and liaise with the LGA in relation to its communications strategy developed with the Electoral Commission of SA.

General Communication Guidelines (cont.)

Internal/employee communication

Have both a plan and a policy. The plan to ensure it is strategic not ad hoc. The policy to ensure all staff are treated consistently and fairly.

Remember communication is a two way street and therefore opportunities for staff interaction should form part of the foundations. Constantly encourage and access feedback to ensure content and frequency are set at the right levels.

Employment advertising

As with all mainstream media advertising it is important to be aware that the market for your message will extend beyond just those you seek to employ. Use the opportunity to promote Council and its strengths.

Research the most effective advertising medium(s) and schedule yours accordingly.

Dealing with the Media

The media is a communication tool just like any other. Use it professionally and it can offer great benefits.

Councils are often seen as 'soft targets' by the media due to their high level of transparency and wide breadth of influence on the community. They (Councils) are a reliable source of accurate information and therefore make it easy for journalists to develop stories.

To ensure a balanced viewpoint is presented it is useful for each Council to have protocols for dealing with the media.

Awareness of a few foundation principles is also useful -

1 - Know your local media (communicate with local journalists regularly and ascertain how you can assist them to provide accurate and balanced articles)

2 - Be available and transparent (a weekly media briefing, that involves the Mayor, CEO, and a trained media manager if possible) will help to overcome any problems of misinterpretation.

3 - Realise and accept that the media hold the upper hand - they produce the news and present it to the community.

4 - Ensure information provided to the media is indeed NEWSWORTHY
Newsworthy = "*something which is new, up-to-the-minute, unusual, or sensational but it must affect many people and therefore be in the public interest*."

5 - Be selective with media release topics releasing information that is indeed newsworthy.

6 - Ensure your spokespeople are media savvy, trained and up for the task

7 - There is no "off the record". Only say what you are prepared to see used.

8 - Be prepared and have facts ready for use.

9 - Set your own agenda (and stick to it)

10 - Be a valuable source for the media (not just a constant request for coverage). Good relationships are based on MUTUAL benefits

11 - Have a media policy (which should include contact protocols and an efficient system to deal with media enquiries)

12 - Include the media as an important market segment in your Strategic Communications Plan

Developing Your Communication Action Plan

A good Communication Action Plan can play a significant role in the success of any program, project or initiative of your Council.

It helps by organising your communications with a written schedule for actions and activities: what, how, when, where, and to whom you should be communicating.

By taking the time to develop your Communication Action Plan carefully, you will be more likely to identify and take advantage of opportunities as well as identify and counter issues that have the potential to negatively impact your Council.

Councils that use their Communication Action Plan most effectively look to their Plan to help with day-to-day decisions about communications. This encourages greater focus and effectiveness.

In summary, developing your Communication Action Plan will help your Council:

- Clarify what it needs to communicate
- Clarify which audience/s are to be focused on, by identifying the best opportunities
- Determine communication vehicles that will provide you with the best chance of reaching your audience/s
- Craft its messages to heighten impact and produce maximum results
- Develop strategies for measuring each element of your total Communications Action Plan
- Establish timelines for the implementation of your communication activities
- Review the results of your communication activities to help manage your Council's communication effectiveness

Developing Your Communication Action Plan (cont.)

Your Council's Strategic Plan should guide your Communication Action Plan

Your Council's communication function (like all Council functions) should operate to support your Council's Strategic Plan.

This means that the first starting point in developing your Communication Action Plan is to review your Council Strategic Plan and its strategic business objectives. These will provide a key focus for your communication efforts.

As an example, suppose that one of the strategic business objectives in Council XYZ's Strategic Plan is:

> *To increase usage of Council's website by residents and businesses.*

Achieving this particular strategic business objective could be assisted by setting and achieving the following strategic communication objective:

> *To ensure the Council's website and the benefits of using it are well understood and well promoted to residents and businesses*

Your task will be to examine <u>each</u> of the your Council's strategic objectives and determine how each can translate into one or more communication objectives as per the above example.

Not all communication activities you will need to undertake will relate directly to your Council's Strategic Plan, for example where:

- You are aware of opportunities not represented in your Council's Strategic Plan
- New issues and opportunities arise from month to month or more often

Your Council's Communication Action Plan should be flexible enough to accommodate these communication activities.

Developing Your Communication Action Plan (cont.)

The steps to develop a Communication Action Plan are:

1. Situation analysis

Determine and outline the background of the issue, initiative or program and what your Council's related business objectives are. This helps clarify the answer to the question "*Where are we?*"

Determine and outline your Council's desired outcomes. This helps clarify the answer to the question "*Where could we be?*"

Determine and outline which communication activities will help achieve the desired outcomes. This helps clarify the answer to the question "*How can we get there?*"

To illustrate the process using the example where Council XYZ has an under-utilised website…

- Background to the issue - "*Where are we?*": Council has an under-utilised website
- Desired outcome - "*Where could we be?*": Website usage by residents and businesses has increased significantly
- Communication activities that will help achieve the desired outcome - "*How can we get there?*": Ensuring the Council's website address and the benefits of using it are well promoted to residents and businesses

2. Communication objectives

The communication objectives we develop are formulated on the basis that if we were to achieve them, there is a very strong likelihood that our overall aims will be met.

Collectively, the set of communication objectives answer the "*How can we get there?*" question.

Using the previous example, our communication objectives might be expressed as:

> *To ensure the Council's website address and the benefits of using the website are well promoted to residents*
>
> *To ensure the Council's website address and the benefits of using the website are well promoted to businesses*

When you have developed your list of communication objectives, examine them carefully from a logic and commonsense point of view to determine whether they are likely to be effective in achieving your desired outcomes. If not, more thinking will be required.

Ensure your communication objectives are clear, realistic and measurable.

Developing Your Communication Action Plan (cont.)

3. Target audience/s

Here we think about who we need to reach with our communication activities.

Most of the time we are not trying to communicate with 'everyone'. This is because specific Council issues, initiatives or programs usually only relate to segments of the population.

For example, it would be hard to justify spending precious funds to communicate to 'everyone' about:

- An increase in dog registration fees (when we should focus our message to dog owners)
- Upcoming road works on a particular street (when we should focus our message to only those who will be affected)

Issues *are* worth communicating to 'everyone' *if* there is justification.

For example, it may be justified that we should target both dog owners *and* non-dog owners of we wish to increase *levels of dog registration*. The logic being that non-dog owners may have some influence over their dog-owner friends (e.g. via social pressure, guilt). Here it may be decided that dog-owners are the primary target, but non-dog owners are an important secondary target.

Thinking about your audiences in terms of segments and also in terms of primary and secondary priority targets will help you fine-tune your Council's communication activities. It will also help you to determine which communication vehicles, messages and 'tone' will work best when you have an idea of exactly who you are trying to communicate with.

4. Research

Developing communication always involves making choices, for example: who to target, what to say, and how to say it.

Research helps us to make the decisions about the choices we need to make. There are many forms of research you can undertake for little or no cost. These include examining previous communication campaigns of other Councils on similar issues, internet research, secondary research (examining previous research conducted for other purposes) or just simply asking the right people a few questions (e.g. those who have previous experience).

Major communication campaigns may require more extensive dedicated research (e.g. dedicated surveys, focus groups) to help ensure any significant outlay for communication will be effective.

Developing Your Communication Action Plan (cont.)

5. Key messages

When developing your key messages you need to think about issues such as:

- What outcomes your messages are intended to achieve (e.g. behaviour change or attitude change or both)
- How your audience/s currently think about the issue/initiative/program issue
- Whether your task is to educate, remind, reassure, worry or even challenge your target audience/s
- The 'benefit' of your messages to your audience/s (consider "What's in it for me?" from their perspective)
- Ensuring your messages are clear and very easy to understand

Again, using the example where Council XYZ has an under-utilised website, the following might be effective messages:

> *Save your business time and money by paying your rates online at Council XYZ's website* (business audience)
>
> *There's so many great free things to do in your local area at any time…just visit Council XYZ's website to find out what's on* (resident audience)

6. Communication strategies and methods

Communication strategies are the **actions** you will take to get your messages across (e.g. *Conduct an awareness building campaign for Council XYZ's website*).

Communication strategies can be further broken down into **component strategies/actions** for example:

> *Audit current Council newsletter, brochures, signage, advertising and other communication related materials to ensure that Council's website address is featured prominently*
>
> *Ensure Council's newsletter regularly communicates the benefits to residents and businesses of using the Council's website*

Communication strategies should always be assigned time-frames and responsibilities.

It also pays to also think about the following issues:

- Who needs to be consulted (forewarned) before going ahead with your communication
- Whether the communication may lead to any controversy or significant demand increases on particular Council resources/assets (e.g. call centre or other Council staff) and how this may be managed effectively

Developing Your Communication Action Plan (cont.)

Communication methods relate more to the **vehicles** you will take to get your messages across (e.g. *Council newsletter, brochures, signage, advertising*)

Your choices here should be influenced by:

- Where/who/what your audience/s are (i.e. demographics)
- How well any vehicle 'reaches' your intended audience/s
- The preferred vehicles of your intended audience/s
- Complexity of your message (e.g. a billboard will not be effective in communicating detailed information)
- Whether you wish to create dialogue with your audience/s or simply provide information
- Associated costs

More information about the strengths and weaknesses of various communication vehicles appears in pages 9 - 15.

Matrices to help your decision as to choice of communication vehicle appear in pages 17 & 18.

7. Budget and resourcing

You only have access to finite resources and there is always an 'opportunity cost' when selecting one course of action over another…so it's important to:

- Be aware of and factor costs/resources in your decision making
- Identify costs/resources associated with various communication strategies/actions

Developing Your Communication Action Plan (cont.)

8. Evaluation

Evaluation or success measurement is about examining how well your communication strategies have achieved your overall aims.

Measuring your success and understanding the reasons for that success:

- Will allow for fine-tuning of future strategies
- Allows Council to justify the investment made in the communication strategies undertaken

Evaluation should be planned for in advance of the communication and should involve the setting of various 'Key performance indicators' (KPIs).

Communication related KPIs to consider include indicators related to:

- Actions (e.g. if one of our communication strategies is to feature a regular article on Council's website in the newsletter, the KPI might be *An article on Council's website appears in each edition of the newsletter*)
- Desired outcomes (e.g. *75% of residents who use the internet regularly have visited the Council's website at least once in the last 12 months; 60% of residents are aware of Council's website address; Increase in website traffic by 20%)*

Many KPIs we would like to measure have a direct cost or at least an associated opportunity cost. This needs to be considered when selecting KPIs.

Format of Communication Action Plan

Objective 1:

Target audience	Communication strategies/actions	Key messages	Timeframe	KPIs	Who	Costs
Who we wish to communicate to	What is to be done to get our message across to our target audience, which communication vehicles are to be used.	What we wish to get across to the target audience	When the strategies/actions are to be implemented	Our success measures (actions, desired outcomes)	Who is be responsible for implementing the strategies/actions	The costs associated with the strategies /actions

Objective 2:

Target audience	Communication strategies/actions	Key messages	Timeframe	KPIs	Who	Costs

Objective 3 etc:

Target audience	Communication strategies/actions	Key messages	Timeframe	KPIs	Who	Costs

Corporate Style Guidelines

Creating Communication style guidelines for your Council ensures both consistency of message and the injection of an appropriate and audience appealing personality to everything you do.

The guidelines can be in any format but should cover the following key elements -

1 - Message development process outline

2 - Content considerations

3 - Any technical requirements/considerations

4 - Intangible considerations (i.e. the personality you wish to portray)

5 - An outline of key stakeholder groups and their demographic profile

6 - Goal outlines (i.e. to generate a reaction or response, to compile opinions, to test concepts etc)

Having a central distribution or approval point for all external Council communications is highly recommended to achieve consistency and style adherence.

How to Evaluate Your Communication

Effective communication needs to be constantly evaluated.

Communications mediums are changing and new ones being developed at a rapid pace as the community shows a thirst for information that all manner of methods are seeking to satisfy.

Knowing what communication vehicles and processes work and which ones don't allows frugal budgeting and resource placement.

The simplest way to evaluate your communication efforts is to set a tangible goal for each vehicle and/or process and then make an assessment based upon meeting that requirement.

Running regular (annual if possible) research projects that ask residents and other stakeholders what communication mediums they absorb and which Council messages they recall is another good evaluation tool.

Clear and accurate records of all feedback and assessment statistics is also important to allow comparisons to be made.

Here are a few simple evaluation techniques you may consider putting in to place -

- Set unique phone numbers and website addresses for different communication campaigns to allow you to accurately assess what responses each campaign generated

- Provide staff with simple information sheets for all phone calls that record what media the callers consume and where they access Council messages

- Hold regular (perhaps monthly) communication assessment meetings with key staff to gain their feedback and suggestions about what is and isn't working

- Include communication effectiveness questions in any general research programs

- Collect usage data (i.e. website hits, leaflets distribution renewals, event attendance etc)

- Hold 'straw polls' online to access resident's opinions and preferences

- get all event attendees to complete a brief survey on the basics of how they found out about the activity, their media habits and general awareness of Council communication vehicles