

In the Loop: Communicating With Your Citizens

For city officials and city staff, the value of communicating and connecting with your community cannot be overstated. Since the passage of Proposition 218, it has become even more important, because cities now must truly work in partnership with voters to make critical financial decisions that will largely determine their community's financial stability.

However, forging that bond with your community can be difficult. Numerous surveys have told us that voters don't trust government, and, in many cases, rightly so. Not because something improper is going on but because, in large part, voters really don't know *what* is going on. Human nature is such that people distrust things they don't understand and others whom they don't know very well. If you want your community to trust you more, you must help them get to know you better. Tell them — simply, directly and honestly — what you do, how you do it, how well you do it, why you do it and how you spend their tax money.

For several years, the City of San Mateo has had great success with a project that does exactly that. The city sends property owners a

"benefit statement" with their property tax bill that shows how much is spent on police, fire, community development, public works, library, recreation, general government and public facilities services (see "A Strategy for Leadership," *Western City*, February 1997). After learning of San Mateo's positive citizen response to the benefit statements, the City of Monterey did the same last November.

Chris Gates, president of the Center for Civic Renewal, has given an excellent presentation at several League functions on how to work effectively with the community. Gates says that citizens choose not to participate in government not because they are apathetic but because they are angry. They are angry because they don't believe government is really working for them. But maybe, Gates suggests, they just don't see *how* government works for them.

Included in this issue of *Western City* is an article that provides some insight and advice on how to run a successful community election, offered by some of those who have been through it (see "Living With Proposition 218," page 10). In light of the passage of Prop. 218, this information is of great value to cities. However, it is vitally important that cities make public education, outreach and communication an active part of their regular business. If the only time your community hears from you in any significant or proactive way is during an election cycle or when you want something from them — input, participation, support, volunteers, etc. — you won't have much success.

You must talk to the public on a regular basis. You can use the local media — including community papers and the ethnic press — a city newsletter, speaking engagements or newsletters for local civic organizations and neighborhood associations, your local cable channel, utility or other bill inserts and a city website. But whatever you use, keep the lines of communication open both in good times and bad. It's the only way to build trust and forge a lasting bond.

Employ a long-range, ongoing communications strategy. Don't ask your community for their attention, help, input or concern and then neglect to keep them in the loop or listen to their needs after the issue has been resolved or the project completed. This is a relationship. It requires patience, nurturing and hard work. You must be in it for the long haul. Don't just *view* your community members as stakeholders, *treat* them as stakeholders.

In the Winter 1998 issue of *The Public Relations Strategist*, Archie B. Carroll, Ph.D., of the University of Georgia, examines the rights and roles of stakeholders. He writes that "... stakeholders include all those individuals who have legitimacy and/or power.... To appreciate the stakeholder concept, it helps to understand the idea of a stake. A stake is an interest or a share

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in an undertaking. A stake is also a claim. Claims are often assertions of a right."

It is important to know who your stakeholders are, what's important to them and how best to reach them. From a traditional business perspective, stakeholders are shareholders, customers and employees. For cities, stakeholders are those who pay city taxes, those who use city services and facilities whether they are residents, visitors, people who work locally and live elsewhere, city employees and the local media.

The League is currently producing a publication, *Performance-based Management: A City Official's Guide to Results-oriented Government*, that will be available to city officials and others for purchase in late summer 1998. The publication includes a section written by Marty Boyer, a consultant whose Hayward-based firm, Communication Advantage, works primarily on behalf of local government agencies.

The following text is an excerpt from Boyer's article, "Building Public Confidence in City Government," which offers cities some excellent advice on how to effectively communicate with their stakeholders and build a long-term communication approach.



Speaking the Public's Language



It starts with simple words, concise sentences. As grade-school children, we learned to speak simply, directly: subject, verb, object. It was so easy then. We were without cunning, instinctively expressing our thoughts with only one goal: to have our likes, dislikes, wants, needs, understood. We've spent a lifetime since then learning to obfuscate our messages with jargon to help us prove we are insiders; big, 50-cent words to show our intelligence; acronyms to demonstrate we are clever; and worst of all, passive, unclear sentence structure to help

keep a protective wall of vagueness around us. It has all become an art form in public service that only feeds the public's alienation from government. Follow simple rules to express yourself and your city's issues clearly:

Talk plainly. Use the words real people use in real life — not the ones you imagine enhance your stature. We tend to be very direct and concise when we talk to our teenagers, because instinctively, we know the message has to be strong. Would you ever tell your teenager to "utilize their intelligence" before doing something? If you are like most parents, you will tell them to use their head. Be smart. Think before they act. Simple directives. Would you tell the same teen that bad behavior is going to "impact" the "feasibility" of a good future? More likely, you would shout somewhat passionately that their bad habits are going to mess up their lives, destroy their future, get them in trouble. Admittedly, our direct style with our kids doesn't always get cooperative response. But the experience reminds us that we can and should deliver important messages in a clear, concise way that our audience cannot mistake.

Talk in terms of the public interest. Results-oriented government means achieving the results the public wants — not those *we* want. For example, success at the building inspection department should *not* mean that we've reduced each worker's caseload to 75 files — it means we have found a way to consolidate all the permit applications to one visit, one form for customers' convenience. It means we can now promise next-day inspection, and that 75 percent of our customers last year report that they found the inspection staff helpful in the building process. Success is *not* a no-increase budget with a 10 percent reserve and no layoffs. It is 20 percent fewer burglaries, 200 more children served in after-school recreation programs, and improvements in four neighborhood parks.

The message that works is the one that addresses the public's concerns. Whatever the audience, whatever the medium, the message that responds to residents must have three elements: empathy, action and background. First, validate their feelings about an issue. Tell them what the city is going to do about it, then provide enough background to give the issue context. Let's say, for example, the escalating problems at a small local park have outraged neighbors. In that neighborhood, then, improvement in that park is a result they seek. The effective message to the homeowners' group, or the local newspaper, does not begin with a plodding report on redevelopment process, grant applications, the workload of the park development or home-

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less statistics, although this may be relevant information. The results-oriented message that will reach your audience is much simpler:

"We understand that this is a problem (we, too, are residents here). We're going to increase patrols and clean up the trash, and see that it doesn't get like this again. Let me explain further..... (Causes? Ideas: Increased patrols? More lighting? Neighborhood involvement? Fencing? Special assessments to finance?)" Empathy, action, background.

Formulating an effective message means sifting through the rubble of government process and information to find the nuggets. It means boiling your message down to that gem of an idea that responds to exactly what the public cares about. When you are drowning in a stormy sea, and the Coast Guard comes by, do you stop to tell them the water is cold, the waves are high, your legs are tired and you don't swim well? Your message is much more direct: "Help!" You'll find the most appropriate message if you focus on the highest-priority points first, remembering the elements of the effective message. Add details by priority as they are useful, and as time and interest of your audience allow.

No Such Thing as Good PR by Accident

Preparing for the essential, results-oriented message can become organizational culture — with some nurturing. Good press, good communications are seldom accidental. The leaders who build high approval ratings, survive a scandal, or turn challenges into opportunity, do not do so because the most terrific "sound bite" just spilled out when they opened their mouths. They succeed because they have thoughtfully prepared a simple, believable, forthright message that addresses the questions of their audience. It is really quite simple: What would inquiring minds want to know? You can position your city's officials and staff to be ready to deliver the right message for your most commonly raised issues.

1. Identify and prepare messages for your most important issues. If you are truly a results-oriented organization, then you have taken steps to find out what the community's top priorities are, and developed your strategic plan (goals and objectives) accordingly. Every organization, every industry, every city, has its key issues — six, eight, maybe 10 highest priorities. Some will be timeless — public

safety, clean streets, responsible spending. Others will be longer-term issues — jobs, recreation programs, housing shortages and traffic problems. A few will be "priorities-du-jour." It may be a major planning project, or that deteriorating park we discussed, or a crisis in confidence at city hall. For each, sit down and prepare appropriate key messages. It should be no more than two sentences, capturing no more than three points. Hopefully, you have a small team that will work together to find consensus on messages crafted together.

2. Prepare everyone to tell a consistent, effective story. Compile the key messages in a resource document for department heads, lead staff, city council — everyone who is likely to represent the city publicly. We must recognize that city staff are your first lines to good public relations. Those who face the public regularly should be trained and prepared in the art of telling a clear, concise, honest story. If they haven't had such training, consider it. It will be one of the cheaper public relations and crisis prevention tools you ever purchase.

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3. Develop the relationships that will help you tell the story. All the above is well and good, most city representatives will say, but it doesn't matter if the press and public only want to focus on the negative. It's a hue and cry heard in most California cities, but not entirely fair. On one hand, the local media has gone through consolidations and downsizing like every other industry, and the public are the losers. On the other hand, we have failed

to do our job. We fail to acknowledge that the media was not hired to be our personal public relations firm. We cannot expect them to attend each ribbon-cutting, check-passing or retirement, when:

- a) We don't ourselves go home to read those stories about others; and
 - b) We fail so often to tell any of our stories — good or bad — effectively.
- Get to know the local reporters. Talk to them

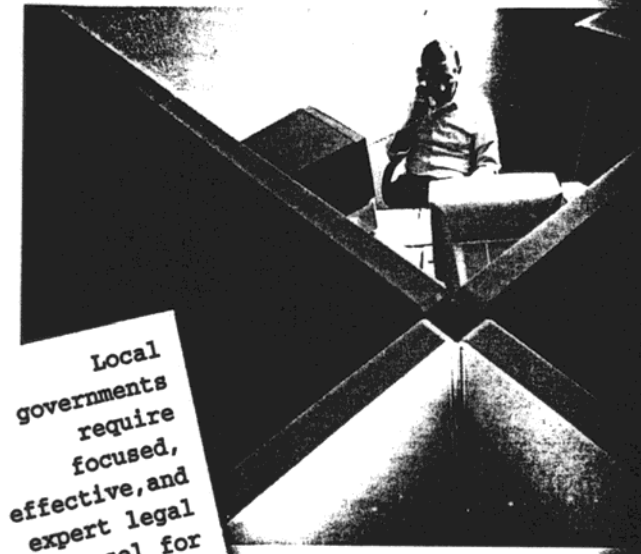
regularly, feed them the tough news as well as the good. Be the same, forthright, cooperative person in bad times as you are when the city appears as a winner. Join Rotary or the Lions Club. Participate with the Chamber of Commerce. These are the relationships that will foster better mutual understanding of the issues on an ongoing basis and nurture a responsive media when it counts.

4. Use available tools to promote your good results without spending a lot of money. The city official active with the civic organizations has a speaking and sharing platform that public relations money can't buy. Some of the resources they carry to these opportunities require only staff attention. The key messages described above prepare you to be effective in any setting with little advance notice. City managers should see that a fact sheet is prepared annually (usually at budget time) that gives officials and staff the fast information they need to answer questions. What is the budget? What are the council's highest priority programs for the next year, and achievements for last year? How many city employees? What are the district boundaries and which council person represents which district? What are the key resource phone numbers to help citizens? What is the crime rate, and how does it compare with similar communities? Median income, housing price, leading industry, etc. These simple sheets not only equip you to answer questions correctly, they also are fast ways to ensure the accuracy of those pesky details reporters so often get wrong in a story rushed through on deadline. And they help minimize follow-up time playing telephone tag.

5. Collect citizen input. Don't forget the need to collect citizen input, too. Again, you have options that cost very little. Town meetings cost only staff time. Ongoing customer satisfaction surveys conducted with daily business are largely free. More formal surveys can be conducted in relatively inexpensive ways, too. Web sites are a wonderful way to collect public input. Collect letters to the editors, listen to neighbors. These are but a few ways we can ensure that the results we are offering match the expectations of the public.

Excerpt written by Marty Boyer, a consultant whose Hayward-based firm, Communication Advantage, works primarily with local governments. Excerpted from Performance-based Management: A City Official's Guide to Results-oriented Government, available from the League in late summer 1998.

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