Auditing your Council’s Communications

BECHER TOWNSHEND, MANAGING DIRECTOR
Beyond PR

How often have you found yourself in a reception area or meeting room, looking at the nerve centre of an organisation’s communications capital, the brochure stand! Does it give the impression of an organisation in control? Does it provide an accurate impression of the organisation and its target audiences? And when was it last given a thorough review?

The usual structure of a local council is that it is divided into departments (divisions), each with specific communications requirements and often, each using varying tools to communicate. In many councils, the job of preparing communications falls to the officer responsible for the program area. As such, councils end up with communications of divergent quality reflecting the design and written talents, or the technological awareness of the managing officer. What can occur is an abundance of brochures, newsletters, online and printed communications, different consultation methodologies and varying methods of response. It’s time to take stock!

An annual communications audit is recommended for every local council. Such an audit provides an analysis of all council communications tools and allows your council to review and decide how it can best provide the information needed by stakeholders. The findings of a comprehensive communications audit will enable your council to eliminate superfluous tools, to streamline communication without compromising efficiency and reach, and to redesign communications to best meet the needs of audiences while balancing the resources of the council. Also, at a time when there are new and emerging technological options available for communications, an annual audit allows your council to properly consider how to best deliver its messages. To accomplish these goals you need to understand what your users seek from your council, where they go to find information when it’s not from you, and how you might better serve them.

Determining the Need

Communication tools used by councils range from the traditional (e.g. direct mailings and print newsletters) to newer initiatives such as websites and portals, e-newsletters, bulletin boards, list serves and email discussion groups, and may include other online tools such as webcasts, instant messaging and blogging (text and video). All of these techniques require considerable effort on the part of the producers and have an impact on the way users interact with the council.

Planning a Communications Audit

The following are worth considering as part of a communications audit:

Employee buy-in

An important element of a communications audit is the way that it is supported through the organisation. Explaining the importance of employee participation at the outset and ongoing communication about progress will lead to employee engagement and support once audit recommendations need to be implemented.

User Research

Consideration needs to be given to research methodologies to establish user requirements.

Internal versus External Assessment

Will your audit be undertaken internally, or by outside experts? The advantages to doing the audit internally will relate to an evaluation of direct costs and internal skills. The advantages of using outside experts will be their objectivity, time and availability, the knowledge they bring from other organisations, and the credibility that may accompany their credentials and expertise.
Audit Methods

Regardless of whether the audit is done internally or externally, a common set of methods can be used to gather the data needed to make assessments about practices. Audit methods include interviews, surveys/questionnaires, critical incident analysis, participant observation and document review.

Focus Groups

Focus groups will corroborate and confirm findings from your user research (survey/s) and can generate additional ideas or potential solutions for effective communication with your target audiences. Focus groups can assess the communication wants, needs and opinions of target audience groupings, supplying additional data on users’ expectations, frustrations and experiences interacting with your employees through the mechanisms you have created. Focus groups can obtain information and clarification on issues that are a priority, features that are important, and ways to measure success.

Website Usability Testing

The website is a primary communication vehicle used by councils. To be effective, a website must meet the business needs of the organisation and be intuitive to navigate as well as easy to learn.

Alignment

A good audit will review communications in relation to your council’s vision, mission, goals and objectives. It is necessary to understand best practices for communication tools and website design and it will be helpful to identify comparable organisations that can serve as models for future communications tools. An annual communications audit checks the accuracy and currency of communications and can check these tools against quality criteria to ensure communications are leading practice, such as in regards to standards for access.

A strategic communications audit is a systematic assessment of your council’s capacity for, or performance in essential communications practices.

The audit determines what is working well, what is not, and what might work better if adjustments are made. An annual audit will provide for evaluation and strengthened future performance.

With over ten years experience as a journalist and media adviser, Becher Townshend is now a leading issues and crisis management consultant in Tasmania and Managing Director of Beyond PR. In 2007, Beyond PR was awarded the State Winner Business Services, Small Business Champion Awards.
Enlightened leadership with the application of effective management styles and techniques creates clear, measurable organisational improvement. Consistently effective organisations are those that: have superior strategies for managing and developing people; focus on both individual capability and organisational capability; have learned to measure people as assets as well as costs; and are able to resist the short-run pressures that cause chronic under-investment in people.

Extensive research has shown that the following human capital management factors provide a core set of measures that senior management can use to increase the effectiveness of their investment in people and improve overall performance.

**Leadership Practices:** Managers’ and leaders’ communication, performance feedback, supervisory skills, demonstration of key organisational values, efforts and ability to instill confidence.

**Learning Capacity:** The organisation’s overall ability to learn, change, innovate and continually improve.

**Knowledge Accessibility:** The extent of the organisation’s “collaborativeness” and its capacity for making knowledge and ideas widely available to employees.

**Workforce Optimisation:** The organisation’s success in optimising the performance of its workforce by establishing essential processes for getting work done, providing good working conditions, establishing accountability, and making good hiring choices.

**Employee Engagement:** The organisation’s capacity to engage, retain, and optimise the value of its employees hinges on how well jobs are designed, how employees’ time is used and the commitment that is shown to employees.

Council “leaders” exist at many levels in the organisation and the development of these practices and capabilities in human capital management is crucial to their current and future success. Effective leaders don’t just ‘talk the talk’, they ‘walk the walk’ to create a shared understanding of the core business of council within all staff. To achieve this, leaders also create a shared understanding of how staff members are to go about their work. These are the demonstrated ‘values’ of the organisation. And to be successful in such a challenging environment, leaders need to create a ‘shared feeling of power’ so employees are empowered (through knowledge, information access, training, roles and responsibilities, and authority) to make decisions.

For councils to successfully grow and develop, leaders must also create a shared vision of where their organisation is heading in the future. To achieve these four shared understandings (core business, values, empowerment and vision) council leaders must be powerful communicators in both their actions and words. Developing leaders within council is no longer an opportunity for improvement but a requirement for success. The challenge of attracting and retaining talented staff, along with the growing demands of Local Government, require each council to strategically manage the ‘human capital’ asset like any other.

There are five components to developing a leadership strategy for any organisation including:

**Sourcing Leaders** - internal and external recruitment programs;

**Aligning Leaders** - performance management incorporating competencies and behaviours;

**Developing Leaders** - training, assignments and mentoring;

**Assessing Leaders** - objective feedback systems and leadership committees; and

**Reward and Recognition** - systematising performance and behaviour impacts.

**Key Competencies and Associated Behaviours for Senior Managers**

The competencies required of senior managers and directors has also
evolved to lead human capital development. These key competencies can be developed and easily assessed by the day-to-day behaviours of directors. The executive behaviours are the observable actions, style and approaches used by leaders that demonstrate specific levels of each competency. Many of these behaviours can be developed over time with training, mentoring, on the job assignments, assessment and feedback.

The following competencies have been identified as critical to achieving success in executive-level positions.

Interpersonal Skills:
- Communication with impact;
- Interpersonal effectiveness;
- Cultivates productive working relationships;
- Possess strong client focus; and
- Persuasiveness.

Leadership Skills:
- Builds commitment - sells the vision and influences others;
- Delegates and empowers staff;
- Builds organisation’s talent (coaches/teaches);
- Change leadership; and
- Fosters great teamwork.

Business/Management Skills:
- Creates strategic vision and direction;
- Entrepreneurship and innovation - grows the core business;
- Operational decision-making;
- Business acumen; and
- Mobilises resources.

Personal Attributes:
- Adaptability;
- Positive disposition;
- Executive demeanour;
- Displays political awareness - reads the environment;
- Commits to reflection and self-awareness - accurate self insight;
- Personal drive and energy, integrity and passion;
- Achieves outcomes, drives for results; and
- Focuses on continual improvement.

Each council needs to create a customised Leadership Development Strategy to improve individual and organisational capability in the short, medium and long-term. When people are managed as a key asset of council, managing and developing their capacity becomes a strategic imperative of senior management. And while such strategies can be supported by HR, they must be embraced and directed from the top downwards in order to succeed.

LG Performance Tasmania provides training, development program and consulting in Leadership Development for councils.

Determined to focus on service and on service and on service.

At the Commonwealth Bank we understand that service makes the difference. That’s why our specialists offer real industry knowledge and expertise, and work closely with your business to tailor effective financial solutions.

To find out more about how we can help your business, contact Stephen Mulcahy on 03 6238 0666.

Commonwealth Bank of Australia 2008 ABN 49 123 123 124. PR0042-240608

Determined to be different.