



Overview and Performance Scrutiny Forum

Scrutiny Project Group
report on

External Communications

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PROJECT GROUP MEMBERS:

Lead	Councillors: Helen Bagley Howard Borrell
Group Members	John Fern

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW AIMS

1.1 Background

Surprisingly Chesterfield Borough Council has never had a formal communications strategy.

1.2 For many years the council purely utilised a traditional press officer who produced press releases and managed the production of core council communications.

1.3 That arrangement evolved into one where part-time agency staff covered media relations and PR work.

1.4 During that period the world of communications changed completely. No longer is the printed word the sole (or even main) means of communicating. The internet has made communication both easier and more complex.

1.5 The council recognised the need for change and recently appointed a Communications and Marketing Manager and a Public Relations Officer to manage the transition to a more modern organisation that will communicate using a variety of methods, appropriate to the audience.

1.6 This review aims to make recommendations which ensure the new External Communication Strategy is customer focused but also takes into account the needs of the council as it moves forward with embracing new technology and managing a difficult budget.

1.7 The main objectives of this review are:

- a) to review and evaluate current practice with regard to External Communication. To identify what are we doing well and what we need to improve.
- b) to find out about the External Communication Strategies of other councils and assess the possibility of transference of some of these ideas to Chesterfield Borough Council.
- c) to make recommendations to ensure that the new strategy is consumer led and enables Chesterfield Borough Council to move forward with technology to be a council fit for the times in which we live.

2. REASONS FOR THE REVIEW AND LINK TO PRIORITIES

- 2.1 To feed into the production of the Council's new External Communication Strategy.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 The Project Group recommends :
 - a) That the council adopts clear branding and a 'one council approach'.
 - b) A review to look at how better coordination of marketing and communication activities can be achieved to enable the objectives of the new communications strategy to be delivered. This may involve the need for a review of the organisational structure.
 - c) That analytics (the discovery and communication of meaningful patterns in data) are used to guide web content and to be able to better predict and improve performance..
 - d) That the council consider adopting a 'digital first approach' to all its external communication

4. REVIEW APPROACH

- 4.1 What we did: we looked at our current structure and approach to External Communication to identify the strengths and weaknesses.

- 4.2 We visited outside organisations to identify differences and practices that CBC could adopt to improve our approach .
- 4.3 We looked at consumer feedback and data from website usage. In addition the working group was keen to find out details about CBC consumers.

The work undertaken can thus be divided into 3 key areas.

- 1) The current situation
- 2) Visits to other organisations
- 3) Consumer information

5. EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH

- 5.1 Evidence gathered to support the review work includes visits to:

City of Lincoln Council– **Appendix A** provides detail.

Derbyshire County Council – **Appendix B** provides detail.

Peak District National Park Authority – **Appendix C** provides detail.

- 5.2 The group analysed the results of the ‘Are you being served’? resident survey 2013, which is part of a coordinated national survey with other councils. - **Appendix D**
- 5.3 The group looked at data regarding website usage – **Appendix E**

6.0 REVIEW FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

- 6.1 **The current situation at CBC -**

Information regarding the current situation at CBC was obtained through a number of meetings with John Fern, Communications and marketing manager. The Scrutiny working group was mindful that as John is involved in the writing of the new strategy his input was vital but also that he may already have firm ideas for what he would like to see in the new strategy. With this in mind the working group were clear that they would adopt a consumer led approach and seek to complete work which would ensure the new strategy would deliver

benefits to CBC consumers.

6.2 There are clearly some issues with the existing structure at CBC due to the fact that CBC has never had a formal communications strategy. However the working group did not see this as part of their remit, though it may be an issue for further review.

6.3 **Team structure**

The team currently manages external communications. Information generally has to be sought from departments rather than provided. This slows down the speed of information provision.

A degree of marketing takes place in the department. It is felt that, at the very least, the overall marketing strategy and approach should be standardised.

6.4 **Branding**

It is considered crucial that the council presents a consistent and standard approach to image and branding. This is currently hard to achieve as not all marketing is undertaken by the same team.

There are autonomous marketing staff in other departments such e.g Housing or Leisure who work independently of the main communications team.

The working group feels that greater connection between all groups is vital to ensure the required consistency; that may require the physical re-siting of staff or it may be possible to achieve by agreeing a common approach and developing and maintaining strong internal communication.

Recommendations :

- a) That the council adopts clear branding and a 'one council approach'.
- b) A review to look at how better coordination of marketing and communication activities can be achieved to enable the objectives of the new communications strategy to be delivered. This may involve the need for a review of the organisational structure.

6.5 Website issues

It is a common misconception that the public will access the CBC website to find out the latest council news. They don't !

The public access the website, in the main, by entering their requirement into a search engine e.g. "Staveley healthy living centre" or Chesterfield Council planning" – to seek out a specific piece of information - and are taken directly to their required website area. They do not start at the Home page and attempt to navigate their way through a complex labyrinth. The modern internet world has bred impatience and the public expect to be able to find what they want quickly. A slicker website design, with content focusing on usage of key words to link better to searches, is fundamental to adding to the user experience and creating a positive perception. A good example is if a user was to enter "gym chesterfield" into a search engine the CBC leisure facilities appear in 11th place. Better content can improve the search rating.

A large percentage of CBC web users access was via mobile devices; it is vital that the CBC site is configured well to ensure ease of use.

6.6 Social Media

The council provide Twitter and Facebook updates.

The policy is not to provide a set amount per day but to post when there is something to post about; the communication objective is to drive traffic to the website. All press releases are posted on social media.

Destination Chesterfield also provide social media updates and re-issue most of the council Facebook and Twitter content. Currently Destination Chesterfield has four times as many Facebook followers as CBC (547 at 10 June 2014)

Twitter is seen as the best social media method of communicating. CBC currently has 4589 followers (as at 10 June 2014) and reaches many more via intelligent hash tag # usage. Twitter is much more about imparting news and many followers use the service in that way i.e. read links from newspapers and organisations that they have an interest in such as CBC and Destination Chesterfield.

Members of the public also use social media to post complaints and significant Communications resource is used to respond – after, at times, considerable research.

6.7 Paper v On-line

In the East Midlands 14.2 per cent of residents do not have access to the internet¹. Some of these people will not have the knowledge to access the internet.

However online access is rapidly becoming the standard method that residents use to acquire information; that percentage will inevitably increase as the IT literate generation grow older and maintain their current access practices.

At present there is little evidence to suggest that paper communication should or could cease, if we are to serve our residents effectively, more that the emphasis on online should increase as efforts are made to gain more social media followers and a website that is more user friendly.

Recommendation :

- c) That analytics (the discovery and communication of meaningful patterns in data) are used to guide web content and to be able to better predict and improve performance.

6.8 Visits to other organisations

The visits to outside organisations and subsequent reading of their documentation proved useful. Visits were made to City of Lincoln Council, Derbyshire County Council and the Peak District National Park Authority – all three very different in size and structure.

However one issue stood out as a problem to Chesterfield that the others didn't suffer from to as great a degree – Communications isolation. Chesterfield residents have to rely on a weekly newspaper, the Derbyshire Times, to receive the majority of their local news although a web-based newspaper, the Chesterfield Post, has emerged to partially fill the gap.

¹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/re1/rdit2/internet-access-quarterly-update/q1-2014/info-internet-usage.html>

The town receives minimal coverage on local television and radio with the only Chesterfield based radio station focusing almost exclusively on music.

The town suffers geographically from being very close to Sheffield, Leeds, Derby and Nottingham with the media concentrating their attention on the areas of high population.

For example Lincoln, a city with a slightly smaller population, is the focal point for the region. It has its four radio stations based in the town – BBC Radio Lincoln, Lincs FM and community radio stations Siren FM and Lincoln City Radio - that cover all local news and activities and almost seek out information from the council to promote; similarly local TV regularly features events and local news. The local newspaper is supplemented by a first rate on-line publication, The Lincolnite, that has full time staff and actually prides itself on getting news out more quickly than the local newspaper.

All the councils visited use social media and their “take-up” is important but not crucial although social media is now recognised, by all councils, as the most appropriate tool to impart urgent information such as weather and transport problems .

Recommendation :

- d) That the council considers adopting a ‘digital first approach’ to all its external communication.

6.9 Consumer information

6.10 Although the group looked at the results of the ‘Are you being served? Resident survey – Appendix D it was very difficult to draw any real conclusions from the information, particularly regarding the use of the CBC website and social media. We do not know all of the reasons why people do not use the CBC website extensively. Evidence from the visits to the other organisations shows that investment in social media is crucial.

The data shows that usage of the CBC website is growing, rising from 182,307 unique visitors in 2012 to 254,744 in 2013 (up 39%) with the total number of visits to the website increasing by 49%, up from 310,776 to 465,259.

The majority of searches are for information regarding the two leisure centres, with the museum, crematorium, car parks and the car boot sale also having lots of traffic.

Fewer searches have been made for transaction type services (except council tax).

The website is clearly being used increasingly and needs to be developed further to ensure that it is an effective communication tool. Work needs to be done to ensure that information on the website is clear and accessible to users and that it is clearly branded as CBC. However if the council is to meet its desire for a 'channel shift' more work needs to be done to encourage customers to complete transactions online rather than in person or by post.

7. REVIEW CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Overview

7.2 Communication is a huge area and one that is ever changing. The changes in how we communicate over the last twenty years are probably greater than the previous few hundred years.

7.3 Nowadays people expect to be able to conduct their business 24 hours a day whether that be personal banking or making payments to the council. Similarly there is an expectation of being able to access information just as easily.

7.4 CBC must recognise that online communication will become the de facto standard and ensure readily available and easy to understand information will be available.

7.5 The website needs to be easy to manoeuvre around but it should also be recognised that it is not always the appropriate medium for getting out key messages.

7.6 Nowadays expectation continues to increase and to capture the public's attention it is vital that the online approach continues to evolve. Small video clips bring any story to life and make it much more likely that it will be digested. The working group suggests there is a need to adopt such a practice, where appropriate, and continue to innovate as technology moves forward.

APPENDICES:-

A – City of Lincoln Council

B – Derbyshire County Council

C – Peak District National Park Authority

D – Are You Being Served? Residents survey 2013

E - Website data

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