

STRATEGY & PARTNERSHIPS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 30 SEPTEMBER 2010

COMMUNICATIONS, MARKETING & PUBLIC AFFAIRS STRATEGY

Report of the Head of Communications, Marketing & Public Affairs

Context

The way an organisation communicates is one of the keys to its success. Whether communicating with its customers, its peers or those who work within it, the ability to clearly state what it does, why it does it and what it is, remains crucial. This is yet more important for a public sector organisation whose very existence depends, ultimately, on income from taxation, and whose core purpose is to serve the public.

Not only must such a body work even harder to explain how it spends its money and why, but the residents it serves have a right to know. Furthermore market research suggests that the public expect local authorities to keep them informed and feel more favourably towards their local council if they are kept well informed.

The reputation of this organisation is a key driver in its ability to deliver for residents. If it is trusted, seen as well-managed and open about its failings as well as proud of its successes, residents will generally support its decisions.


Where it is seen as inefficient, ineffective or secretive, they will instinctively distrust those decisions, markedly affecting the County Council's ability to deliver for residents.

**Our reputation is scattered around these boxes.
We need to aspire be in the green (right hand) box**

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Resented• Devious• Doesn't care• Out of date• Takes our money• Self-serving• Doesn't fit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Value for money• Trust-worthy• Listens• Dynamic• Works for us• Does best• Reflects Oxfordshire
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Our reputation is our licence to operate effectively

Working for you

 **OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**
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The protection and enhancement of reputation is the core function of a corporate communications function.

Strategy

The goals of our communications strategy are:

- **Marketing & Communication** - ensure residents of Oxfordshire are aware of the Council's performance and priorities for the future. This implies the need to be more proactive and consistent in getting our message across i.e. to be strategic, holistic and integrated in our approach.
- **Branding** - protect and enhance corporate reputation. Our 'brand' image is muddled and a clearer and more consistent approach is needed for the future.
- **Internal Communications** - ensure that the Council's workforce is kept abreast of key developments and understands the priorities to which it must contribute. Good internal communication also supports the effectiveness of operational delivery.
- **Stakeholders** - We need to be better at keeping key stakeholders briefed so they can exercise influence for the benefit of the County.
- **Communication Channels** - we need to embrace and exploit new forms of communication so we can maximise the opportunities to connect with stakeholders whilst minimising costs.
- **Improve cost effectiveness** - we need to invest in communications and marketing by redeploying existing resources. Over the medium term we can improve communications & marketing whilst reducing current spending on these activities.

The County Council Management Team (CCMT) and the Cabinet have already agreed that we need to:

- Professionalise the function and build expertise and capacity through a 'one team' approach
- Embrace new ways of working to achieve success
- Seek to reduce costs and add value.

Key Changes

Improvement can be delivered rapidly, but only if we can develop an effective team and breakdown silo approaches. Key to this is the creation of a corporate team and the building of good working relationships with service and corporate managers.

The key strands to this strategy are set out below.

Marketing & Communications

- **Media relations** - In Oxfordshire relationships with the media are generally good. We need to be clear about how both sides can continue to

interact on reasonable terms. An informal protocol should be agreed with the local media: key principles being:

- Openness and honesty wherever possible - legal and contractual arrangements sometimes restrict the Council's ability to be open
 - Balance in reporting - there are always several points of view and the Council's view should be fairly presented
 - Understanding that media is a customer and its needs must be met in a timely manner
 - Focus on issues rather than persecution of individuals
 - Access to key politicians and managers for reporters.
- **Focus on key themes and projects** - to ensure the Council markets itself effectively it is necessary to:
- Concentrate on key messages which are regularly reinforced
 - Focus on proactive communication with Oxfordshire's residents (the audience), interest groups and localities rather than reactive engagement with the media (the conduit)
 - Ensuring press and marketing staff are actively engaged with service managers and not just waiting to receive information
 - Ensure the message(s) are credible to the audience
 - Link operational stories to key communication themes
 - Help the public to identify services with the organisation
 - Target the message effectively (know your audience(s) and tune the message and the channel of communication to the various audiences)
 - Plan ahead and link local messages with national/regional events where possible
 - Engage key stakeholder groups where appropriate e.g. when the Council is in campaigning mode
 - Where possible engage with the audience (two way) rather than just communicating with them (one way)
 - Tailor messages for local communities
 - Monitor citizen reactions/attitudes (a customer dashboard is being developed and will be reported on to CCMT and the Cabinet at quarterly intervals)
 - Review this work at the end of 2010/11 to establish how effective it has been.
- **Plan and focus** - An effective marketing campaign takes time to mount and deliver so an organisation in reactive mode is unlikely to be effective. Historically the Council has been largely reactive but for the future we want to operate in a planned and managed environment. A planning approach requires staffing resources, good processes and a suitable IT programme.

Branding

Branding is often associated with logos but in reality it is much more. The County Council's brand image is how it is perceived by people who live in the

area and that, of course, is influenced by perceptions of the quality of its services, the effectiveness of customer relations, how staff interact with service users, the quality of buildings, the media coverage of Council business and many other factors.

The County Council does not have a strong positive brand image. Oxfordshire residents are generally pleased with our services but are less aware of and less complimentary about the County Council. Branding is effective when it:

- Presents a positive image which resonates with the audience
- Is easily identifiable - until recently the branding of some County Council buildings has been so poor that it has not been possible to read signs on buildings from across the road
- Is consistent with the organisation's values (the behavioural norms of the organisation)
- Is introduced sensibly and cost-effectively.

These are the branding goals we will seek to achieve over the medium term, in combination with a wider drive towards a more customer-focussed organisation.

Internal Communications

The workforce can only work effectively and be good ambassadors for the council if they are clear about:

- the Council's priorities and how these relate to their jobs
- What the Council is achieving
- Who their leaders are
- How they can engage (be empowered) to help improve the organisation

Currently there are far too many messages being sent to staff and it is difficult to get a clear and consistent impression of what is going on. Far too much internal communication is in written form and too little is delivered in a face to face setting. Opportunities to reinforce messages and to have a dialogue about key issues at staff conferences and manager meetings are not being fully exploited. In large part this is due to the devolved approach to internal communications, the inadequacy of planning and the paucity of corporate resources to manage this activity.

Within the new Communications, Marketing & Public Affairs Unit we will improve staffing resources for internal communication and address the following issues:

- Be clear about key messages for the year ahead
- Rationalise internal magazines to ensure consistent and coherent corporate messages are delivered
- Place less emphasis on written communications (including email) and more on video broadcasting and meetings with staff

- Use staff conferences and manager meetings to reinforce key messages and to offer staff the opportunity to engage/be actively involved
- Keep messages simple and easy to understand with opportunities for staff to comment/ check understanding
- Test that messages are being understood and acted on.

Stakeholders

Oxfordshire has more than its fair share of 'movers and shakers', but makes little or no effort to mobilise this resource. For example our efforts to attract regional or central government funding could be considerably enhanced by securing the support of appropriate stakeholders. To do this we need to address the following:

- Stakeholder records - we need to improve our record keeping so we can recognise individuals and their interests/ expertise
- All of the County Council's marketing and campaigning needs to include an analysis of stakeholders and how they might be invited to assist, or their concerns addressed
- Raise Oxfordshire's profile in Westminster.

Communication Channels

In the 21st century more and more people receive information electronically rather than through newspapers, magazines and leaflets. We cannot dispense with paper because many older people still rely on traditional communications media, but we do need to recognise the existence of the "connected customer" and provide them with information in the form that suits them. This requires us to address the following:

- Support our key messages with moving pictures to supply to media, or websites such as 'You Tube'.
- Create a regular online podcast from senior staff focusing on key strategic challenges we face and reporting key achievements, or reviewing events. Where appropriate it will be useful to include leading politicians in these broadcasts
- Offer news, and high-grade content to Oxfordshire's 61 community websites (content they cannot afford themselves) to ensure our messages get to their readers from a source they trust
- Provide a regular video broadcast of "a day in the life of" by staff from across the organisation on the front page of our website, showcasing the breadth of what we do.
- Use the website to communicate with residents as well as providing information for them.

Improve Cost Effectiveness

The current deployment of resources across five directorates makes it impossible to cost accurately communication and marketing activities for the County Council. Resources are currently found in:

- The Communications team in Corporate Core. In addition to the staff there is a very small marketing budget.
- Numerous staff in service directorates who engage in communications and marketing activities. For most of these staff the activity is a small part of their job but there are several staff for whom communications is a major element of their work (some of these posts have no long term funding). Few of these staff are communications professionals.
- There is considerable spending by directorates on publications and marketing although much of this activity is funded from budgets provided for wider service delivery purposes. A recent exercise identified publications costing over £0.9m.
- Directorate spend on website/micro-site activity via external agencies and ICT.

We need to rationalise all of these activities in order to strengthen the corporate team and change our approach to communications. Over time this is likely to result in few officers dabbling in communication and marketing activities and far fewer 'paper' communications. Significant cost savings should accrue although we will need to invest in online communication tools.

Conclusions

The action described above will allow the County Council to adopt a more professional and modern approach to communication. It will take time for the changes to become fully effective but it is anticipated that all of the key elements will be in place during 2010.

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