

THE COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES

Keeping up with the 24-7-365 live news cycle is becoming ever-more challenging for those local authorities without fulltime on-call press officers. And in a society where content is king, Neasa Kane-Fine, Director of Project Communications at RPS, shares some social media tips on developing the best communications strategy.

With all the noise that's out there, gaining attention is harder than ever. Securing recognition and earning positive media coverage does not just happen by itself. Communications, like every other aspect of managing an organisation, must be planned and continuously managed.

If the media have a 'good story', they will publish or broadcast it, rather than waiting beyond their deadline for a response or comment.

Let's face it, often worthy-but-dull public sector messaging is the last thing on people's agendas. So, local authorities are never going to attract the same loyal following as the big sports or drinks brand. It's not their business to do so.

Excelling at what they do and providing a reliable and trusted public service is what people expect of local authorities. Many of their customers do not even think about their county or city council until major events hit their home or community. A good example of this was the excellent response by local authorities to severe weather events such as the recent snow storms and blizzards.

The public was kept well informed, and saw a highly efficient, co-ordinated team and sustained approach in making the country safe and accessible. That earned their respect, and more importantly, their trust.

GETTING THEM TO LISTEN

According to the CSO 2016 census, over half a million people in Ireland are not Irish born. It appears safe to assume that when people are busy balancing work, minding children, keeping in touch with friends and families from a distance, and when they don't have a vote in Ireland, they are often less engaged in Irish current affairs.

We also have an increasingly ageing population that includes retirees returning from the UK and elsewhere. These demographic changes pose new challenges for local authorities to make services and infrastructure more user and age-friendly, and to make information accessible to all.

Additionally, the changing remit of the local authorities (to support economic development) means that their audience now also includes investors, as well as international business people and potential employees.

KEEP THEM LISTENING

Reaching all of these diverse audiences, as well as the traditional

audiences who have not gone away, requires local authorities to regularly review and revise their approach.

Analysing trends available in data from phone calls received, and measuring engagement on the website and social media are always effective ways to fine-tune a communications strategy.

Social media and the growth in traditional print and broadcast media, through their online news feeds, means there is ever more awareness and scrutiny of local authority services and plans by external stakeholders from various viewpoints, such as NGOs, tourists and visitors, as well as political circles.

CLAIMING THE CREDIT

So much media exposure makes it easier for third parties and commercial bodies to promote their role and often claim undue credit for initiatives they have partnered in, or supported a council in delivering.

How many times do we see commercial sponsors taking credit for community events, festivals and awards that the local authorities are instrumental in enabling and delivering? The good news needs to be owned by local authorities. This means proactively and quickly communicating it in order to get credit for the good public service being delivered.

However, all organisations are judged on how they face and address crises and tough issues. Reputations can be made and lost in a social media second. Therefore, attention should be channelled towards preparing for and managing issues early, thereby preventing them from being a breaking news story that could cause reputational damage.



Neasa Kane-Fine, Director of Project Communications at RPS.



GETTING OUT BEFORE THE STORY

Organisations lose the trust of their customers and stakeholders if they promote only the good news and fail to adequately or quickly address tougher issues. Years ago, some chose to ignore negative news coverage. But, we can no longer afford to do so, thanks to the internet, where there's a permanent archive of news.

Today ignoring issues or negative public comment serves to leave misinformation on the public record forever. Setting out the facts and building understanding is vital to balance an argument, rather than leaving false accusations unchallenged.

Maintaining ownership of the facts requires local authorities to be prepared, available and responsive, while at the same time remaining a reliable and trustworthy source for the facts.

TUNE INTO SOCIAL MEDIA

Organisations have to adapt and adjust their communications strategies to stay relevant to all audiences, including reaching younger audiences on emerging channels and platforms. Stay relevant by continually monitoring, evaluating and evolving your communications strategy and activity.

Listen to what is being said about the council in social media conversations through one of the many excellent free monitoring tools. Local authorities need to keep generating new, creative and engaging content that their audiences will want to share. Content is king!

Demand for creative video content is growing and will continue to become increasingly important as people have less time to assimilate information. Print will become more graphics-driven as people have less time to consume the written word.

INSTAGRAM IS INSTANT

Instagram is growing in popularity, because it instantly shows how and where an organisation or individual is genuinely making a difference. A picture tells a thousand words – and is far more powerful than a Tweet in gaining credit for positive initiatives.

Whereas Twitter is often about being the smartest wordsmith,

MANAGING ISSUES AND STAYING AHEAD

The 24-hour online news cycle means media need more news to report on. Short sound-bites are preferred and information is therefore often taken out of context. Citizens post videos on YouTube or Tweet about a public service or policy or decision they're unhappy with.

So, while local authorities need to promote the good news more, they also have to be aware of and responsive to sensitive issues. Decisions need to be carefully examined and analysed from a communications risk perspective. A strategic approach to communications is essential towards maintaining trust and managing reputation when delivering good public service.

- *This requires communications experts to develop and deliver a strategic communications plan.*
- *It includes monitoring all media coverage and online conversations across blogs, boards and social media platforms so that mis-information does not linger unchallenged.*
- *'Communications' should be on the agenda of all meetings and a system should be in place for logging and tracking issues.*
- *All staff should share a sense of responsibility for communications.*
- *Good, planned communications means statements and spokespeople can be prepared and ready for when a story breaks in the News or on social media.*

Being ready and responsive shows that a council is in charge of an issue by getting factual information on the record and moving the story forward.

talking up something, a genuine picture tells the truth. Emotionally-driven discussions need to be managed with fact-based debate.

While we never encourage clients to engage in negative discourse on social media, there are ways to set the record straight and address negative posts, such as by direct messaging (DM) or posting links to the facts.

LOCAL MEDIA

Local authorities and local media are mutually reliant on each other. In Ireland, we have a thriving regional print media and network of local and community radio stations that now reaches across the world, thanks to their online presence.

We will always need quality traditional journalism to establish the facts objectively and provide balance through impartial reporting and valid questioning of all positions.