Communications Plan

A journey towards communications excellence.
A common foundation; public relations defined

PUBLIC RELATIONS is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, or stakeholders, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest.

*Canadian Public Relations Society*

Like many organizations, the City of Guelph uses the terms public relations and corporate communications interchangeably.
Introduction

The City of Guelph Communications Plan is the culmination of more than a year of community consultation, best practices and other research, and strategy development based on the worldwide gold standard for corporate communications. The Plan serves as a shared framework and provides overall guidance for how the City of Guelph communicates with residents, employees, and other stakeholders.

This Plan has been developed based in part on findings from the City’s most comprehensive public opinion poll in more than ten years; the Citizen Satisfaction Survey (June 2008) which identified communication with residents as a key priority for the City.

While Corporate Communications staff have specific responsibilities for communications, it is every employee’s responsibility to engage in communications. In this way, the Communications Plan is intended to guide all of us, and enhance the services we deliver as a municipality by working collaboratively across departmental lines, enhancing the quality of our relationships, and practicing effective public engagement.

COMMUNICATIONS EXCELLENCE

Communications excellence is a phrase coined by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) as a result of a study of communication management that measured excellence in 400 organizations in Canada, the U.S, and the U.K.

Communications excellence occurs when organizations use communication to manage relationships with their diverse stakeholders to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest.

Studies show excellent communication helps organizations achieve overall goals and objectives. The City of Guelph Communications Plan builds on the strengths of the organization’s Strategic Plan, Corporate Vision, Mission, Values and Brand Promise, and will be a driver in achieving the City of Guelph’s corporate goals.

TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Also central to this Plan is “two-way” communication. Two-way communication brings organizations and stakeholders closer together by allowing them to negotiate with one another to reach mutually satisfactory outcomes. Rather than a one-dimensional plan that prescribes how the City can best convey information to stakeholders, the Communications Plan is a roadmap for truly effective communications that involves ongoing, direct and timely dialogue with stakeholders.

Nowadays, the old, one-way model of “communicating” with stakeholders—a process whereby organizations send messages to audiences—is outdated. By engaging in two-way communication, the City will foster effective relationships with the stakeholders; ensure City communications are well co-ordinated, effectively managed and responsive to the information needs of the public, employees and Council; and encourage effective public engagement.

In the case of government, two-way communication models allow for better, more representative public policy because that policy has been informed and negotiated through dialogue with stakeholders.

The Corporate Communications team would like to thank all of the individuals and groups whose insights helped shape the Plan, and the City’s own cross-departmental working group, whose members brought diverse perspective and unique expertise to the development process.
The City’s Communications Plan provides a framework for the organization to enhance its two-way communication, improve stakeholder relationships, and encourage public participation in the municipal process.

Designed to influence all activities that relate to communications within the organization, the Communications Plan outlines positive and achievable practices that will help the City achieve its organizational goals.

All City employees have a role to play to ensure the success of the Communications Plan. By working collaboratively across departments to ensure the City’s communication efforts are well-co-ordinated and responsive to the needs of stakeholders, we will achieve a more informed and engaged workforce, community and Council.

This is an evolving strategy for the entire organization. The Plan will help build our communications capacity and allow us to develop trustworthy relationships and effective public policy.
Communications

Vision
An aware and involved community and engaged and responsive employees, capable of listening, sharing ideas openly and working collaboratively to shape Guelph’s future.

Mission
To provide a framework to enhance the City of Guelph’s two-way communications capacity, improve stakeholder relationships, and deliver effective communications programs that help achieve organizational goals.

Guiding principles
1. Provide information that is timely, accurate, clear, accessible and responsive.
2. Consider the range of communication tools at our disposal and use those most appropriate to address the needs associated with each circumstance.
3. Work collaboratively across the organization to ensure that information is thorough, factual and timely.
4. Respect the access to information and privacy rights of citizens and employees.
5. Support opportunities for engagement to inform public policy.
6. Strive to achieve a culture of two-way communication and “communications excellence” practices.
Objective 1.1
INCREASE THE PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYEES THAT CONSIDER THEMSELVES WELL-INFORMED ABOUT CITY PROGRAMS, ISSUES AND INITIATIVES.

MAKE INFORMATION ABOUT CORPORATE PRIORITIES AND INITIATIVES EASY TO ACCESS.

Proposed actions
• Promote and leverage existing internal online database of general inquiries/frequently asked questions for employees to find answers to questions.
• Create a source for employees to get important updates on “need to know” information (Council decisions, new policies, etc.).
• Host quarterly information sessions for employees to keep them informed about City priorities, initiatives, financial position (budget), etc. Record sessions and make them available to employees via webcast.

INCREASE EMPLOYEES’ KNOWLEDGE OF DEPARTMENTAL FUNCTIONS ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION.

Proposed actions
• Create department pages on Infonet to educate employees on the function of the department and its divisions, and provide relevant resources and additional information/links to program information, etc.
• Provide an overview of organizational structure and department functions in the new employee orientation program.

ENSURE EMPLOYEES AT SATELLITE LOCATIONS FEEL A STRONG CONNECTION TO THE ORGANIZATION.

Proposed actions
• Increase opportunities for employees across the organization to collaborate through cross-departmental projects, initiatives, and teams.
• Host employee events at satellite locations.
• Expand the Holler brand to be more proactive and timely; incorporate an online component.
• Continue to inform employees of matters affecting them before informing the public.
Objective 1.2
INCREASE EMPLOYEES’ READINESS FOR COMMUNICATION AND PROBLEM SOLVING ACROSS DEPARTMENTS.

INCREASE COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND ENHANCE THE COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY OF THE ORGANIZATION AS A WHOLE.

Proposed actions
• Increase the number of spokespeople and subject matter experts in the organization and provide training. Make credentials known to establish credibility.
• Develop background information and key messages for employees for large projects.
• Provide training opportunities and resources for employees to improve their communication skills.

BUILD UNDERSTANDING OF THE ORGANIZATION’S COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTION IN HELPING TO BUILD BETTER RELATIONSHIPS.

Proposed actions
• Better inform employees on the role of Corporate Communications; incorporate more information into new employee orientation program.
• Implement annual needs-assessment sessions between Corporate Communications and City service areas; develop service level agreements.
• Nurture leadership’s understanding of the communications function.

Note: These are only some of the proposed action items. For a complete list visit the Infonet.
Objective 2.1

Improve the organization’s ability to anticipate and respond to issues.

Proposed actions

• Explore the possibility of establishing an issues committee to identify and review the status of issues and the organization’s response.
• Develop tools to be used across the organization (risk analysis template, communications plan template, key message template).
• Prepare employees to be ready and accessible to respond to inquiries.

Proposed actions

• Ongoing professional development for communications team.
• Conduct boundary and environmental scanning; review on a regular basis to identify emerging issues, top issues, etc.

Develop an issues management protocol to effectively identify, monitor and respond to issues. With the involvement of the Executive Team.

Enhance the issues management capacity of communications employees.
DEVELOP A PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY TO GUIDE THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION PROCESS AND CREATE CONSISTENCY ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION.

Ensure that the process for receiving and responding to feedback from the public is accessible and compliant with the AODA Accessibility Standards when they come into effect.

**Proposed actions**

- Take consultation activities outside of City Hall to a place that’s convenient for the public.
- Create more informal opportunities for feedback.

**Proposed actions**

- Through training and behavioural change, improve the communications capacity of employees, better equipping them to interact with key stakeholders and respond to issues more effectively.
- Cultivate external experts that can speak to City issues.
- Work with employees and Council earlier on to develop key messages; be more proactive.

*Note: These are only some of the proposed action items. For a complete list visit the Infonet.*
Goal three

TO SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE AN ENGAGED COMMUNITY THAT IS AWARE OF AND PARTICIPATES IN THE PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS, AND RECOGNIZES ITS ROLE IN ADDRESSING ISSUES AND CONTRIBUTING TO MUNICIPAL POLICY AND SOLUTIONS.

Objective 3.1
INCREASE PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC CONSULTATION AND DIALOGUE.

Proposed actions
- Explore best practices in public engagement.
- Train employees to select the best engagement strategies to serve their purpose; train employees on how to facilitate them.

Strategies

DEVELOP A PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY TO GUIDE THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION PROCESS AND CREATE CONSISTENCY ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION.
Ensure that the process for receiving and responding to feedback from the public is accessible and compliant with the AODA Accessibility Standards when they come into effect.

INCREASE AWARENESS OF EXISTING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND DIALOGUE.

Proposed actions
- Better promote opportunities for the public to get involved and provide feedback.

IDENTIFY NEW/ALTERNATIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT THAT ARE ACCESSIBLE AND CONVENIENT TO THE PUBLIC.

Proposed actions
- Take consultation activities outside of City Hall to a place that’s convenient for the public.
- Provide informal opportunities for stakeholders to provide feedback (online polls and forums, etc.).
- Hold Town Hall meetings that provide opportunities for the public to ask questions about City matters.
LEVERAGE GUELPH.CA AND SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INPUT.

**Proposed actions**
- Include a monthly quick poll on guelph.ca to encourage informal input on current issues and gauge public perception.
- Develop a social media policy.
- Equip employees with tools and guidelines for using social media (e.g. best practices, dos and don’ts, guidelines for sharing information, etc.).

INCREASE THE PUBLIC’S TRUST THAT THE CITY GENUINELY WANTS INPUT AND WILL TAKE VARIOUS POINTS OF VIEW INTO CONSIDERATION.

**Proposed actions**
- Create a “How to get involved” section of website that lists public engagement opportunities, how to provide feedback, a summary of feedback received, and how the feedback was used. Promote the web page, generating awareness and encouraging future participation.

ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION CHANNELS WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS TO REACH A MULTITUDE OF STAKEHOLDERS IN A TARGETED AND COST-EFFICIENT APPROACH. e.g. neighbourhood groups, libraries, Downtown Guelph Business Association, University of Guelph.

**Proposed actions**
- Conduct a pilot project with a local organization to establish and test an approach where the organization provides City information to its members on behalf of the City and solicits feedback.
- Have stakeholder groups host public events and opportunities for people to talk to City employees to learn more about City initiatives and issues.

*Note: These are only some of the proposed action items. For a complete list visit the Infonet.*
Objective 4.1
IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE CITY OF GUELPH’S KEY STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS.

ENHANCE THE CITY’S MEDIA RELATIONS STRATEGY.
Ensure that City news is covered by local media; increase accurate media coverage of City services and initiatives.

Proposed actions
• Provide more information on critical or complex issues through media packages, media briefings, and more face-to-face time with key reporters.
• Consistently identify newsworthy stories and present them in a way that’s compelling.
• Ensure inquiries from the media are given a high priority and responded to as quickly and efficiently as possible.

DEVELOP A PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY TO GUIDE THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION PROCESS AND CREATE CONSISTENCY ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION.
Ensure that the process for receiving and responding to feedback from the public is accessible and compliant with the AODA Accessibility Standards when they come into effect.

Proposed actions
• Create an organizational model that empowers employees to manage stakeholder relations and work with key publics.
• Create guidelines and provide training to help employees foster relationships with stakeholders (e.g. conflict resolution, negotiation, effective listening, problem solving and decision making, constructive feedback).
• Balance the use of traditional consultation methods (e.g. public meetings, surveys) and emerging methods (e.g. online forums) to best suit the situation.

DEVELOP A SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY.

Proposed actions
• Integrate this strategy with existing social media guidelines and media relations policies.
• Employ social media measurement to gauge effectiveness.
ESTABLISH STRONGER TIES WITH NEIGHBOURHOOD GROUPS, BOARDS AND COMMITTEES, AND COALITIONS.  
*E.g.* Shelldale, community centres, libraries, Youth Advisory Committee, etc.  

**Proposed actions**  
- Work with stakeholder groups to host public events at which City employees/Councillors can address City issues.  
- Explore the possibility of leveraging existing advisory committees (or groups with a similar structure) to help identify key issues, pulse checking, etc.

CONTINUE TO IMPLEMENT THE CORPORATE CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY.  
*Ensure that the customer service standards are compliant with the AODA Accessibility Standards.*  

**Proposed actions**  
- Provide appropriate customer service training and resources for employees.  
- Make the public aware of the City’s customer service standards, including timelines for responding to inquiries, mail, email, etc.

MAKE REGULAR STAKEHOLDER RESEARCH A CORNERSTONE OF CITY ACTIVITIES; REGULARLY ENDEAVOUR TO UNDERSTAND WHAT’S IMPORTANT TO RESIDENTS.  

**Proposed actions**  
- Conduct citizen satisfaction survey every two years.  
- Increase use of research and public opinion polls in municipal decision-making.

INCREASE COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND ENHANCE THE COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY OF THE ORGANIZATION AS A WHOLE.  

**Proposed actions**  
- Better equip our organization’s spokespersons. Provide regular media training.  
- Provide training opportunities and resources for employees to improve their communication skills.

ENGAGE SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS IN ORDER TO BETTER UNDERSTAND CITIZEN INTERESTS AND CONCERNS.  

**Proposed actions**  
- Work with stakeholder groups to host public events at which City employees/Councillors can address City issues.  
- Provide concise summaries of actions taken as a result of citizen input.
Objective 4.2
INCREASE STAKEHOLDERS’ AWARENESS OF CITY PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES.

ENHANCE THE CITY’S MEDIA RELATIONS STRATEGY.
Ensure that City news is covered by local media; increase accurate media coverage of City services and initiatives.

Proposed actions
• (Refer to page 12 for proposed actions.)

CONTINUE TO RELY ON THE CITY’S ADVERTISING PROGRAM TO CONVEY IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO RESIDENTS.

Proposed actions
• Review existing advertising policies and update them to reflect changing circumstances.
• Continue to write/produce high impact ads.

MAKE CITY INFORMATION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INPUT MORE ACCESSIBLE.

Proposed actions
• Explore the possibility of establishing information stations throughout the community. Make them one-stop sources for City information. Consider accessibility features in compliance with the AODA Accessibility Standards.
• Create an inventory of languages spoken by employees and record in HRIS system. Leverage the translation capabilities of City employees to affordably and informally provide information in languages other than English.
• Develop a high level “Get to know Guelph” document which includes core service information. Work with cultural groups to translate and distribute the document to new Guelph residents who may not have access to the Internet or speak English.
PARTICIPATE IN SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS AND PUBLIC OUTREACH.

Proposed actions
• Build on existing school outreach programs (Local Government Week, Engineers in the classroom, Water Conservation Programs, etc.).
• Continue to host public outreach events and open houses.

REVAMP GUELPH.CA.
Focus on presenting information as one voice rather than as information from various departments. Whenever possible, build in opportunities for users to provide feedback on issues/services of the day.

Proposed actions
• Work to ensure website is compliant with the AODA Accessibility Standards.
• Explore centralizing content around easy-to-recognize user themes and customer-focused content categories.
• Use the most straightforward language as possible.

CONTINUE TO SUPPORT THE CITY OF GUELPH’S BRAND MANAGEMENT PROGRAM AND PROMISE.

Proposed actions
• Be consistent with branding internal and external documents and promotional materials.
• Develop and roll out sign guidelines so that all City signage is consistently designed and branded.
• Execute final phase of rebranding process (City fleet, equipment and signs).

Note: These are only some of the proposed action items. For a complete list visit the Infonet.