

STAFF REPORT

TO: Chair & Members, Communications Subcommittee
FROM: Robyn Scherer, Executive Assistant, Engineering Services
DATE: 31 July 2008
SUBJECT: **COMMUNICATIONS**

1 PURPOSE

This report summarises my “impressions” and new knowledge gained at the recent Society of Local Government Managers Communications Forum.

2 BACKGROUND

Prior to joining Council in 2006, I spent six years as the Public Relations Manager for a Crown Research Institute (Forest Research (now known as Scion)) where I lived and breathed communications. Hence my keen interest in an area which I believe is at the heart of Council’s daily operations.

Both Murray Staite and Peter Thomson have encouraged my interest in this topic and supported my attendance at this forum.

3 FORUM PROGRAMME

The two day programme included the following presentations:

Communication Credibility – Developing Strategic Influencers

This presentation from three well-known communications and PR professionals supported the theory that the Communications role within any organisation (including Councils) should sit alongside the Chief Executive ie, second-tier position. This was to ensure that the Council:

- Managed risk
- Provided consistent communications that aligned with the LTCCP policies, and
- Protected the reputation of the organisation.

Communication and the LTCCP 10-Year Plan

Bruce Robertson – Assistant Auditor General

Bruce emphasized that the LTCCP is a major exercise in communication and that the communications role within Council is integral to its success. Bruce was adamant that “Communication to enable consultation” was key to the LTCCP process.

In Bruce’s words ‘what makes for good consultation or communication with the ratepayer is that they get it’. Literally, that the reader (ratepayer/resident) understands what the decision is and how they can influence the outcomes. He stressed that LTCCP communication was not a PR exercise but that it must provide the opportunity for the community to be involved in the process.

The “Sales Pitch” on the LTCCP Summary Guide

Don Mackay, SOLGM

Don’s presentation reinforced most of what Bruce had presented above. His analogy that the LTCCP tended to be “as inviting as the Auckland phone book” provided a light moment.

Don stressed the importance for Councils to “get the stuff that matters out in the public eye”.

He emphasized the importance of the LTCCP summaries which (in his words) MUST present the key issues fairly and neutrally and provide information on the consultation process. He noted that the Budget Summary document on the Treasury website provided a very good example.

Don made an interesting closing comment urging communicators to push for the LTCCP to be referred to Council’s ten-year plan (NOT THE LTCCP)!

The Press Council

Clive Lind, Editorial Development Manager, Fairfax Media and NZ Press Council Officer

The Press Council receives about 45 complaints each year. It is fully funded by subscription from members of the Newspapers and Magazines associations and its jurisdiction covers all member newspapers, magazines and their websites (along with non-members at the Council’s discretion). Clive used his presentation to highlight a number of recent complaints, including some from local government, and explained how the outcome of each one was reached.

Post (Local) Election Survey 2007

Donald Riezebos, Chief Executive, Local Government Commission

Don’s presentation was very dry! His paper was entitled “Review of Acts and 2007 Post-Election Survey”. The LGC surveyed 8 districts in NZ covering motivations and barriers to voting, views on FPP and STV, recall of assessment of advertising and candidate profile statements.

Project Twin Streams

Jenny Chilcott, Strategic Advisor, Sustainable Catchment, Waitakere City Council

Jenny’s presentation demonstrated a very successful Council/Community partnership. Starting out as a stormwater project, Project Twin Streams is focused on addressing issues relating to stream degradation in the Waitakere catchment where they had become a dumping ground for waste resulting in an ecological nightmare. Waitakere received funding for the project from Infrastructure Auckland of \$39 million to be spent over 12 years.

The communications strategy focused on a community approach with in Jenny’s words “The local community being seen as the best conduit to engage local people”. It certainly seemed to work with numerous community organisations including schools involved in countless clean-up days, tree planting and even a children’s book. As well as significant plantings on stream banks throughout the district the project has resulted in the creation of 14 kilometres of walk and cycleways. A very impressive project and one that had the communications people “drooling” at the mouth with the amount of funding available!

Maori Communications

Gabrielle Huria, Director, WAI

Gabrielle's presentation provided a very good insight into how Maori view the world, what their values are and therefore how Council's can work to develop relationships with the Tangata Whenua.

She also emphasized the need for Council's to have a "Cultural Interpreter" on board. This person must be someone who can span all the local iwi interests and should be on staff of Council.

Workshop – Communications Planning and How to Work through the steps

Norrey Simmons, Four Winds Communications

Norrey and I are former colleagues. Her case study focused on "Operation Ever Green" which involved staff from Forest Research (my previous employers). I have huge respect for Norrey and her ability to focus on the job and achieve the right communication pitch to the target audience – she has an amazing ability to leave no stone unturned.

Norrey emphasized the importance of understanding your audience, who they are, their demographic and to then use the right channel to reach them. Norrey's example was daily newspapers which are not a good channel for women under 30 years of age because they just don't read them! She also encouraged the use of community newspapers as a communications outlet as figures show that on average two people within each household read them (and they are free)!

Norrey also espouses SWOT analysis as a "must do" for every communications project.

The forum also provided an opportunity for the audience to pass on their own knowledge and wisdom. The first session focused on internal and external newsletters and examples included:

Queenstown-Lakes District Council – *Meaghan Miller, Communications Manager*

QLDC produces "Scuttlebutt" six times a year (sometimes a "special edition" will be produced if required). It is distributed via direct mailout to 22,000 residents/ratepayers and costs \$13,000 per issue. Meaghan unashamedly admitted that the Council carries out self-advertising in Scuttlebutt but also that she receives \$2000 in advertising revenue from external sources for each issue. She noted that there is a waiting list for external advertisers and that she is very aware of ensuring that there is no competition, ie only one real estate company per issue. Councillors are not involved with the newsletter.

Auckland Regional Council – *Mark McLauchlan, Group Manager Communications and Marketing*

The ARC newsletter is distributed to 450,000 householders 2-3 times each year. And Mark made it pretty clear that he hates it.

Mark's plan is to let the newsletter slowly fade away and to focus communications through the ARC website, ie move right away from paper-based communications. He is in the process of starting a "daily news service" on the website – Mark stated that 75-80% of his audience can access the internet. However, he did add that he keeps the local newspapers in the loop to ensure that he does get newspaper coverage!

Nelson City Council – Penny Bloomberg, Communications Manager

Penny concentrated on NCC's fortnightly tabloid "Live Nelson". NCC see this publication as a "consultation vehicle". It is distributed to 18,500 households at a cost of \$120,000 per year (cost includes some external design which I found interesting as NCC have a fairly large communications department including graphic specialists!). Penny noted that they are having problems with distribution of this newsletter.

Tasman District Council – Mark Rafills

Mark briefly covered Newsline which he said was a "political publication" which was used to build relationships. He noted that Council receives \$30,000 in revenue per year for external advertisements in Newsline.

Best of the Best Awards

Prior to the forum attendees were invited to submit an example of a communications initiative that they had worked on in the last 12 months and which had delivered the goods!

Four finalists were chosen and each presented a summary of their project:

Rotorua District Council (The Winner)

Rotorua's Planning Services Manager, Tracey May presented a witty and entertaining summary of this communication initiative which demonstrated a very different and innovative approach to the public consultation process as part of the District Plan review.

Using the brand 'Fresh Ideas' the team focused on reducing planning jargon and avoiding complex technical language, while presenting their concepts in a format that most people would be able to comprehend and want to be involved in. (Tracey said that they tried not to mention the RMA in any of their communications!) The team focused on using the right media to target groups and made sure their presentations, focus groups etc were audience-applicable. The project included a website which was very popular with the public – see www.fresh-ideas.co.nz.

Environment Waikato – "One Waikato – Seven Wonders" (Second runner-up)

Environment Waikato's Communications Manager, Karen Bennett presented this project which concentrated on the introduction of a "new look" newsletter coupled with a local competition to uncover the top seven natural wonders of the Waikato region as voted by the ratepayers.

The campaign used local well-known identities including Colin Meads and Sara Ulmer and each Councillor was asked to nominate their own "natural wonder". The programme was very well received by the community.

Taupo District Council (Third runner-up)

Taupo's Communication Officer, Samantha Farr presented this project which focused on providing ratepayers and residents of Taupo with more face-to-face access to the Mayor, CEO and Councillors. Initiatives included:

- Morning "Coffee with Rick and Rob" at a local café once a month
- Mayoral Forums where key stakeholders were invited to meet with Councillors as a networking opportunity
- A "Mayor/Councillors" column in the local news paper (Note – the local newspaper provided the latter free of charge).

- “In the Loop” – a weekly internal newsletter (provided via link on their website) from Council staff to the Councillors providing an update on what had been happening at Council from an operational perspective.

Samantha pointed out that Council/Ratepayer relationships had been very poor during the previous Council term but with a new Mayor and Council and a new Chief Executive the opportunity to improve communications was maximized.

Tasman District Council – Aquatic Centre Promotion (Fourth runner-up)

Mark Rafills and Barb Dunn presented the promotion campaign they carried out for the Aquatic Centre.

War Stories from the Communications Battlefield

This part of the programme allowed attendees to recount their first-hand experience of “crisis” situations and how they managed the media fall-out. They included:

- A Council employee found to be “interfering” with bodies at the Council-run crematorium! He was imprisoned.
- A Councillor accused and subsequently found guilty of accessing pornography on the internet.
- An over-zealous Council Ranger who, after receiving complaints of rampaging Muscovy ducks in a new residential area, decided to shoot them in broad daylight just as the local school bus service was delivering young children home!
- A Parks & Reserves Council Officer spraying poisonous chemicals on a sports park the day before the Saturday games.

The main message I took from these presentations is that every Council should have a “Communications Crisis Plan” to deal with any gnarly issues that can suddenly arise and quickly escalate. I suggest that is something Tasman District Council should have in place reasonably quickly. I had experience of “crisis” plans at Forest Research especially as we had a GE trial on site which caused frequent media and protest group distraction!

Closing Address

Jim Hopkins, Councillor, Waitaki District Council and

I found it very difficult to take notes while listening to Jim who is as hilarious and quick-witted as ever. However, his main points were:

- People don’t care about the District Plan but they do care about their own patch;
- Communicators need to educate the local media – he encourages Council’s to build relationships with them and to keep those relationships maintained.

3 SUMMARY

- While sixty people attended the Forum, lack of representation from some of the major Council entities was noted and disappointing.
- Most Council’s position the communications role at the 4th tier (but outside the CEO’s portfolio).
- Staff numbers varied across the board from 0.5 FTE to 10 full-time communications professionals.

- Several people expressed interest in our “external provider” situation and asked how it worked in terms of “ownership” of Council’s communications activities.

After attending the forum and from my own communications experience, I’m even more passionate about how we manage our communications at Council. Not just from the external perspective but also internally.

We have a captive audience and in the words of McLaren & Locker *“Good communication is worth every minute it takes and every cent it costs”*

4 RECOMMENDATION

THAT this report be received.

Robyn Scherer
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