

WHY YOUR CITY NEEDS A PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER:

THE VALUE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FOR MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS

We live in an age of misinformation and fundamental distrust of government. The proliferation of “click bait,” “deep fakes,” “alternative facts,” and other forms of disinformation across the internet and social media make it difficult for your community to know what is true, and to know where to look for factual information. Though local governments are generally more trusted than state or federal governments (according to Gallup’s annual governance poll), a 2014 study by the Harvard Institute of Politics found only 33% of millennial voters report trusting their local government. Cities need to have a strategy for proactively building trust and communicating truth to combat the misinformation and mistrust that damages your organization and presents obstacles to the accomplishment of your community’s goals.

Value Of A Public Information Officer

The value of a Public Information Officer (PIO) is that they are focused on building a relationship of trust with your community through strategic communication.

Miscommunication or lack of communication only fosters deeper distrust of your organization, even when you are doing your level best to serve the interests of your community. If the

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community does not trust its municipal government, how can you hope to gain support for projects, initiatives or ballot issues? Building trust involves two key steps. The first is to do the right thing; making the right decisions on behalf of the community and thereby becoming worthy of trust. The second is communicating; explaining to create understanding among the people impacted by your decisions. When people understand who you are (good people), why you do what you do (good reasons/motivations), and how you do it (doing things the right way), they can begin to trust you.

Everyone in leadership of your city should be invested in managing a positive relationship with the community. Mayors, council members, city administrators/managers and department directors do this by making the right decisions to enable the

possibility of earning trust. Staff at all levels also manage positive relationships with the community by providing good customer service. However, who on your team is focused on communicating about the hard work done to complete that second step of trust building? Cities with a public information officer (PIO) have a professional communicator dedicated to public relations and strategic communications.

Public relations (as defined by Glen Broom and Bey-Ling Sha in *Cutlip and Center’s Effective Public Relations* [a textbook referenced by the Universal Accreditation Board that oversees the Accreditation in Public Relations (APR)]) “is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public on whom its success or failure depends.”

Public information is a function that falls under the umbrella of public relations. Public information is defined (according to the Accreditation in Public Relations Universal Accreditation Board) as “information open to or belonging to the public; and in government agencies, non-profit organizations, or colleges and universities, [it is] the task of disseminating information from the organization to the public.”

The value of an effective PIO goes beyond dissemination of information

to the public. A PIO armed with an understanding of the broader role of public relations and all its functions will be able to communicate strategically, collaboratively, accurately, ethically and creatively in order to be most effective and valuable to the organization.

Whether the city employs a single PIO or a full department of PR/communications professionals, they can provide value across the 12 typical functions of public relations. (This model is taken directly from the Public Relations Society of America and training material used for the APR.)

Typical 12 Functions of Public Relations

Competencies

- Trusted counsel: advise and anticipate.
- Internal communication: engage employees and build trust.
- Media relations: develop public trust and support by working with journalists and bloggers.
- Community relations: establish public trust and support by working with community groups.
- External communication to customers/stakeholders/community members: build public trust and support.

Public Relations Four-Step Process

- Research
- Plan
- Implement, execute and communicate
- Evaluate

Other

- Publicity and special events
- Issues management
- Crisis communication

In my role with the city of Nixa, I take on a variety of tasks related to the 12 functions of public relations. I also believe the theme connecting all these

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efforts relates to reputation management that is all about building the intangible asset known as goodwill. Most work to build reputation is done on blue-sky days, though the stakes get higher during crisis communications. When the community hears, sees and reads a steady drumbeat of positive messaging about how their municipal government serves them with excellence, then, if something negative occurs, they will be more likely to perceive the single negative incident as an exception rather than the norm. During challenging times, communicating a message that demonstrates your organization is aware of issues and proactively working to resolve them also contributes to a reputation of competence and excellence.

The "Public Relations Four-Step Process," is a core principle of effective communications. It is essential to strategic communications and to be able to show measurable return on investment and desirable outcomes for communication efforts.

Another core principle of public relations is access. When the PIO has access to city leadership and is in the

room to listen to the decision-making processes, the PIO can provide valuable counsel by anticipating questions the media may have and how the public may perceive situations. Access also gives the PIO deep understanding of what considerations, options and resources were taken into account by decision makers. That context allows the PIO to work collaboratively with leaders to identify communications goals. Once the goals are known, the PIO works with subject matter experts to craft key messages and strategize effective ways to distribute them. The PIO then executes the communications plan, taking communications tasks off the plate of busy leadership, and conducts analysis to determine effectiveness.

Communication is also, importantly, a two-way street. Your PIO can provide value by leading community listening and engagement efforts. These activities demonstrate your organization's desire to understand and respond appropriately to constituents. Listening and answering questions goes a long way towards building trust. This is why social media is such a powerful tool.

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Lorenzo Boyd | (314) 342-8477 | lorenzo.boyd@stifel.com

Becky Esrock | (314) 342-2923 | esrockb@stifel.com

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Value Of The Investment

The value of the investment in communication is most visible when it comes time to offer voter-education in advance of a ballot issue. For example, I worked with our leadership to develop the strategic communications plan that helped our city pass a use tax ballot initiative on our first attempt. Nixa's voter-education strategy included public meetings and events, flyers and brochures, video, email newsletter articles, website content, earned news media coverage and social media. A PIO builds skill sets across a variety of communications disciplines to use a variety of tactics effectively and provide the most value possible to the organization.

Crisis communications is another area where a PIO delivers significant value. During a critical police incident, I manage communication with the media, monitor social media, and communicate across all city channels to allow the police department to focus on the critical work of public safety and investigating the incident. In a crisis, leaders have to focus on responding, and utilizing a PIO to manage communications with the media and the public will allow leaders to focus on making the right

// The communications mission: Getting the right information to the right people in the right format at the right time so they can make the right decision. //

~unknown

decisions. The Federal Emergency Management Association's (FEMA) Incident Command System values the role of PIOs so highly that it places the position in the organizational structure as reporting directly to the incident commander. If you are not proactively and consistently communicating, then your organization will only be reacting to the whims of media coverage, social media misinformation, and rumors accusing your organization of incompetence and mis-management.

A centralized communications department (as opposed to each department appointing its own communications staff) can eliminate duplication of effort and provide unified messaging. When your communicators share a mission, vision, values, policies,

procedures and processes, they can be held accountable to a consistent system for strategic, accurate, ethical, creative and collaborative communications. A centralized communications team can sharpen each other, provide continuity of work, specialize in particular skill sets, and work as a team to arrive at better solutions than an individual may develop on his or her own. Even a single PIO working as a centralized communications department can collaborate with all municipal departments for consistency, accuracy and unification of strategy, brand and messaging.

Invest in your communications/public relations/public information department and empower them to be strategic in telling the stories of the hard work your organization does. If the city can not afford a full-time communicator, it is important to start somewhere. Just be careful not to under value the specific skill sets and time investment required for effective public relations and communications. The better we communicate the more community trust the organization will enjoy. People trust those with whom they have a positive relationship. Positive relationships are built on good communication. Can your city afford to NOT have a professional communicator on its team? 🍀

Drew Douglas has served as the public information officer for the city of Nixa since January 2017. He has helped organize a regional PIO network in Southwest Missouri with a focus towards crisis communications, and is passionate about the role of public relations in local government. He has more than 8 years of experience in television journalism in Texas and Missouri, where maintaining positive working relationships with PIOs was vital to his work. He holds a BA degree in Film & Digital Media Production from Baylor University. You can reach him at ddouglas@nixa.com.

If your city decides to hire a PIO/PR manager/communications director (or any other similar title), be sure to refer them to the following resources for professional development and continuing education. There are additional organizations that offer training in the realm of public relations and government communications such as City-County Communications and Marketing Association (3CMA), National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC), and Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL). I am most familiar personally with the following four valuable resources for municipal government communicators.

- FEMA offers free training to PIOs to learn the Incident Command System model for managing crisis communications. This is highly relevant to municipal PIOs especially if serving leadership/council, public works/utilities, and law enforcement/public safety. The FEMA training ranges from basic PIO awareness all the way to a master PIO course offered at the Emergency Management Institute in Maryland.
- The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) offers regional groups for networking and professional development across a broad spectrum of professional communicators, and they offer a path to accreditation in public relations.
- The Government Social Media Organization (GSMO) offers annual conferences to develop social media skills particular to government use.
- The National Information Officers Association (NIOA) offers annual conferences where PIOs (mostly representing local government and public safety agencies) from across the nation share lessons learned from managing information in the midst of the crises that were the biggest newsmakers in previous years.



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Presented by:

Joe Montes, ACDA, CFE
Manager, Advisory Services
jmontes@bswllc.com



Ron Steinkamp, CPA, CIA,
CFE, CGMA, CRMA, CCA, CCP
Partner, Advisory Services
rsteinkamp@bswllc.com

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