

SHREWSBURY TOWN COUNCIL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY



SEPTEMBER 2010

1.0 Introduction

Shrewsbury Town Council has a duty to engage effectively with its residents, partners, employees and stakeholders and to do this it is vital that a communications strategy be developed.

Communications is a complex, multi-dimensional topic and, contrary to popular belief, it is not only about public relations.

Communications within Shrewsbury Town Council are currently in their infancy. The Council is a new institution, created in 2009 following local government reorganisation, and as such its communication methods have been limited while the organisation bedded-down. Current communications include; press releases, the website, customer service, Council Tax leaflet, marketing material, consultation, the Annual Report, how councillors interact with constituents and council documents such as agendas and letters.

This strategy will look at how the Council can develop its communications over the next 12 months.

All departments need the basics of communications. From answering the phones and dealing with the colleagues, to front line customer service and carrying out media interviews, everyone needs to understand the fundamentals of communications.

The overall aim is that Council communications should be a two-way process; to give people the information to understand accurately what we do, so they can make informed decisions, and to get information from residents and stakeholders so we can understand their needs.

1.1 Why is communication important?

Local government communications have, over the past few years, increasingly focused on reputation. Better communications lead to recognition and respect – reputation **does** matter. Many councils fail to effectively communicate who they are and what they do – and the less people know about an organisation, the less likely they are to rate it highly.

Achieving the Council's aims and objectives requires good communication with every individual, group and organisation we work with, or provide services for.

An important part of any organisation's role is to ensure that information provided both by and to it is easily accessible, relevant and timely. The Council has to recognise the importance of communication and be committed to developing its own services to meet the expectations of the community it serves.

The advances made in information technology offer exciting new ways of communicating. At the same time, for many people, traditional methods – newspapers, telephone, leaflets – still play a fundamental role that must not be undervalued.

1.2 What should we be communicating?

Research by MORI, an independent research organisation, and the Local Government Association, states that the most important drivers of council reputation among local residents are:

- perceived quality of services overall
- perceived value for money
- media coverage
- direct communications
- council performance
- clean, green and safe environment
- positive experiences of contact with council employees

If the Council is to build a strong reputation, effectively inform residents, engage and improve customer satisfaction then these drivers must form the basis of its communications strategy.

There is also a need for proactive and reactive information:

- Proactively – telling people information to influence and change attitudes
- Reactively – giving residents information they *want to know*

1.3 Who should we be communicating with?

The Council's audiences are wide and varied but will typically include:

- Residents
- Town Council staff
- Hard-to-reach groups, including young people and BME audiences
- The media
- Shropshire Council (unitary authority)
- Voluntary groups and organizations
- The business community
- MPs
- Other public sector organizations (police, health, fire)
- Visitors and those who work in the county

(Audiences have to be targeted for different initiatives and communicated to appropriately by using the right tools which will be looked at in sections 3 and 4).

1.4 Our aims and vision:

The Town Council's main aim through communications is to '*Put Shrewsbury First*' for the benefit of residents, partners, employees, stakeholders and visitors. The Council's communications work will:

- raise residents satisfaction, trust and confidence levels
- raise awareness of services provided by the Council

- raise the profile of Shrewsbury as hub for business and tourism
- support elected members in their role as community leaders
- make best use of technology to innovate and engage with hard-to-reach groups such as young people and BME audiences
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of the Council

Our vision is that our residents will:

- know what services the Council provides and the quality of service they can expect from us
- feel confident and satisfied with our services, and their costs
- understand how to get involved with, or influence, our work

In addition, visitors to the town will:

- see Shrewsbury as a top destination to live, work and play

2.0 Existing communication methods

Prior to June 2010, the Town Council did not have a team member directly responsible for communications. As a result work was picked up by other officers, in addition to their daily duties.

Methods in place before June 2010 included:

- Website
- Council agenda papers/letters
- Limited PR and marketing activity
- Annual Report
- Interactivity of Councillors with constituents
- Customer service

Since the appointment of a full-time Marketing and Promotions Officer (MPO) the Council's communications activity has increased and the MPO has:

- Developed a system for planned communication: Currently the MPO works with officers and councillors to plan timely campaigns and media saturation. However as the post is still relatively new there are times where opportunities are missed, perhaps because an officer or councillor does not realise the PR potential of a scenario or event and also due to officers not being used to an individual being responsible for this type of work. Awareness of the MPO will naturally grow in time.
- Implemented a basic brand consistency through media communications: The MPO has created a press release template and media cribb sheet for use by officers and councillors. Better use of branding has also been implemented in all work carried out in partnership with the town's Market Hall which is run

jointly by the Town Council (canopied section) and property owner, Jones Lang LaSalle.

- Improved Media relations: The MPO works closely with local journalists and the wider media to have a two-way relationship. As a result, press releases issued by the MPO are usually picked up and printed verbatim. There are still press releases issued without input from the MPO, though these are decreasing.
- Initiated some basic public consultation at high footfall local events.
- Developed a Communications Strategy for the organisation.

3.0 Planned communication

The Council will aim to deliver core actions which, if achieved, would have a marked impact on the organisation's reputation and the perceptions of residents. These are:

- Manage the media effectively to promote the Council
- Provide an A-Z Guide to Council Services
- Publish a regular council newsletter or magazine for residents
- Ensure the council brand is consistently linked to services
- Carry out regular consultation
- Maintain and develop STC website

The Council will also ensure that all communication activity takes into account the differing accessibility needs of all, regardless of culture or ethnic origin, nationality, religion or belief, gender, disability, age, sexuality, geographical location or any other status.

The Council's approach will be sensitive to the needs, values, language and cultural differences that exist within its communities and will make communication materials available in other formats where reasonable and appropriate.

3.1 Manage the media effectively to promote and defend the council

The media plays a strong role in shaping perceptions of local government, so informed reporting is vital.

The Communities and Local Government report found people were most positive about their council in areas where the council had a good relationship with the local media.

Our key points for effective management of media relations are to:

- ◆ Respond to journalists in full within a reasonable time (maximum 4 hours)
- ◆ Be helpful, polite and positive
- ◆ Never say "no comment"

- ◆ Ensure any statements to hostile enquiries are cleared by the most appropriate person and keep written records of responses to journalists
- ◆ Monitor response times to media enquiries and evaluate media coverage
- ◆ Ensure the appropriate council spokesman is fully briefed and available for interview if required
- ◆ Issue timely and relevant press releases using the brand template (available to all staff through the shared filing system)
- ◆ Pre-empt potential stories arising from council agendas/minutes by issuing proactive PR
- ◆ Organise Media training for key speakers (Council Leader, Mayor, Town Clerk)

It is also planned to add a Press section to the existing website which would include media releases, information and a selection of photographic material for journalists use.

In addition, to keep councillors and officers up-to-date with press coverage, the MPO is planning to launch a regular Media Summary via email.

3.2 Provide an A-Z Guide to Council Services

At a consultation event held in June, 63 per cent of people admitted they did not know what services the Town Council provides.

Research for the Local Government Association (LGA) Reputation campaign revealed that producing A-Z information is one of the key actions a council can take to improve awareness and satisfaction among residents.

An A-Z can also generate savings for the Council by increasing awareness among residents of self-help channels such as the website.

It is proposed to produce an A-Z Guide to Services once a year, either as a stand-alone document or delivered as an insert in the Shrewsbury Chronicle or Admag.

3.3 Publish a regular council newsletter or magazine to inform residents

Research shows that there is a direct link between how well informed the public is about council services and how satisfied they are with them. Therefore by regularly communicating with our local residents we can engender a more positive ethos and people are more likely to feel that the Council offers value for money and provides a good quality of service.

Regular communication with the electorate also fulfils part of the Communication & Community Engagement criteria for Quality Council Status, towards which Shrewsbury Town Council is aiming.

It is therefore proposed that the council launch a regular newsletter (bi-monthly or bi-annually) to be issued in the same way as the A-Z Guide to Services. A full options report has already been produced for members consideration with mind to launch the first publication in the Autumn of 2010.

3.4 Ensure the council brand is consistently linked to services

The Council will look to brand its communications consistently, ensuring a single brand identity by:

- Making sure all staff have access to electronic logos and templates (press releases, letters, etc)
- Using a uniform font type – all printed communication should display the Council logo and should use Arial 12 font
- Developing a photographic library which supports the Council's brand and is available to staff, journalists and partners online
- Ensuring the brand is reinforced through visual media such as advertising

3.5 Carry out regular consultation

The Council is committed to consulting local taxpayers, service users, local businesses, service providers and our own staff and Members, to identify ways in which we can improve the services we provide.

Consultation is a key part in the communications strategy as it is a two-way exchange of views between local people and the Council. We are keen to get people's opinions about both the future of Shrewsbury and the services we deliver. This will help us to make decisions and allow us to tell people about why we provide services in the way we do.

At present, most of the Council's consultation is by way of questionnaires and members interaction with the public.

A further method that could be used by the Council to gather public opinion would be to form a Citizens Panel – a group of people who volunteer to become part of the consultation process by agreeing to respond to surveys and discussion groups with the Council over a period of time. The panel would be randomly selected and representative of the whole of the town (age, gender, race, socio-economic status etc).

3.6 Maintain and develop website

The Town Council already has a website which is regularly updated and contains key information about the Council and important events.

It is already planned to introduce a new Press section to the website. Other additions could include a staff area and consultation portal, although these options are capacity and budget dependant.

The Council is committed to being fully inclusive, therefore engaging with hard-to-reach audiences, including those who do not speak English as a first language, is essential. The MPO is currently looking at a range of methods to better signpost services for residents who speak little or no English. One option is to provide a translation service for all major documents which service users could

request by clicking on a tab, in their own language, on the website. This will incur costs to upload the information to the website initially, and then a charge would be made by a translation service each time a document is requested in an alternative format. A full report, containing all available options, is currently being prepared for members consideration.

4.0 Additional Communication proposals

As well as delivering the core actions described in section 3, the Council would also benefit from looking at new and innovative methods of communication to keep up with an ever-changing world.

These options are dependant upon budget and/or manpower.

4.1 Social Media

Social Networking is now a credible communication channel that is increasingly utilised by organisations, as well as individuals, as a means of developing online communities for gathering and disseminating information that is of mutual interest.

Many Public Sector bodies have their own Social Networking sites. The most popular are Facebook and Twitter, Facebook currently being the larger of the two with over 18 million users in the UK although Twitter's popularity is rapidly rising.

Social Networking sites offer value for money and a strong community focus. Running the sites utilises existing ITC systems and is therefore effectively free to set up and update.

Launching our own Town Council pages would provide an effective real time, two-way communication channel. It will allow us to engage with online groups that may not normally interact willingly with the Council. It will also help provide more people with access to Council services and allow the Council to engage with new audiences such as the under 25's, and will bridge the gap taking the Council to the place where the people already are.

There will be certain communities that the Council has previously struggled to communicate to consistently, such as the deaf or BME communities that will already be using Facebook and/or Twitter.

It is a fast, efficient way of communicating as there are no lead-in production times for print or production – you can have a message up and available for viewing by your fans/followers in minutes.

At the same time it positions Shrewsbury Town Council as a modern council and helps us to change perceptions of remoteness by allowing us into the user's own space. More people will be tempted to engage with us because it does not involve attending a meeting, or even using very much of their time.

Social Networking sites will provide the opportunity to communicate with people immediately, in real time. This will, of course, bring its own challenge in that to be

truly valued by Friends/Followers there must be a regular flow of messages and content that will encourage regular interaction. We will also need to ensure that we regularly monitor our pages so that we can address any specific questions or issues that arise, so there are manpower issues to consider before the pages can be launched.

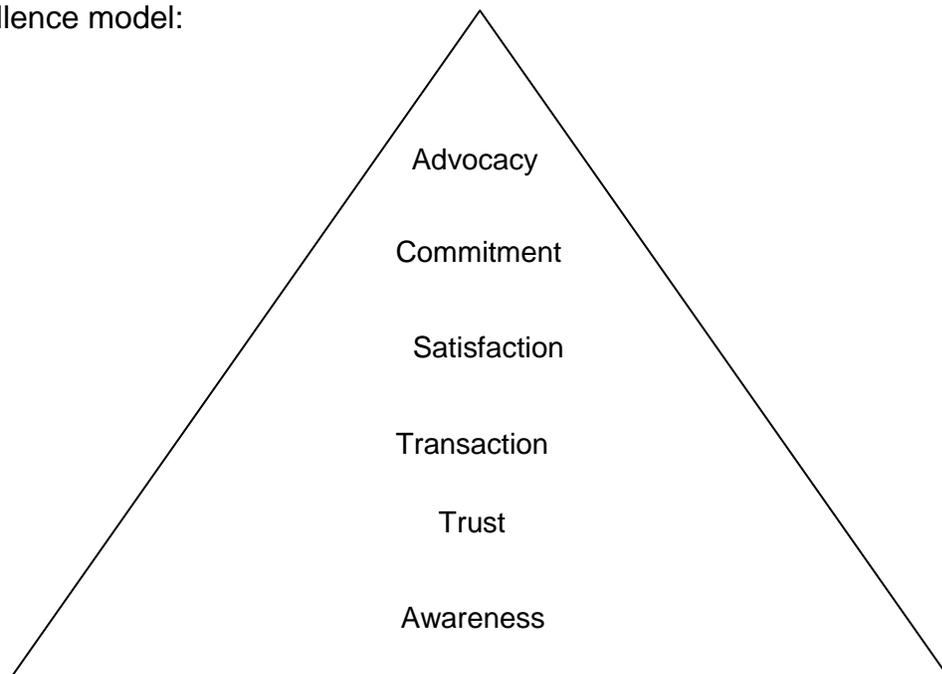
The benefits of Social Networking far outweigh any potential problems or difficulties. It is therefore recommended that the Town Council consider launching Facebook and Twitter pages within the next 12 months.

A full Social Networking proposal is being developed for consideration by members.

4.1 Internal Communications

MORI have undertaken considerable research into internal communications and consider it to be essential in building staff advocacy (see model below). This is where staff will speak highly of the Council and are proud to work for the organisation.

MORI excellence model:



Staff play a crucial role in building a council's reputation. Whether they are frontline staff or officers representing the council externally, the way they behave and how they talk about the council can have a huge impact. Good internal communications are therefore very important in helping a council achieve its objectives.

There are currently no formal internal communication channels in place within Shrewsbury Town Council.

One of the most effective ways to communicate with staff is through the use of a regular newsletter. This should be regular enough so that information is both

relevant and timely, but needn't be a monthly occurrence if staff capacity is an issue.

A bi-monthly or quarterly publication, available either as an electronic document or hard copy, will:

- help create a 'can-do' culture and build a committed and high-performing workforce focused on achieving the council's goals
- boost morale and motivation
- encourage staff to be ambassadors for the Council
- help the organisation learn and grow –staff are a vital source of information and ideas
- provide a better customer service – informed frontline and other staff will be up to speed on what's happening in the council and why.

A regular newsletter could also be supplemented by news bulletins posted on the existing website and/or emailed out to staff with computer access.

5.0 Evaluation

It is extremely important that the Council measures the success of this strategy so that it may inform any future plan.

What can we measure?

- Raised awareness of the Town Council and the services it provides
- Attitudes towards STC
- Participation and engagement with Council projects, initiatives and consultation processes

How will we do this?

- Consultation with residents – perception and satisfaction surveys
- Measure press coverage for saturation and against press releases for content usage
- Hits on website
- Number of Friends and Followers on Social Networking sites (if applicable)
- Staff survey