

CHAPTER TWO

Public Relations and Municipal Reporting

An effective program of public relations and municipal reporting is essential to building citizen support for the city's objectives. Local residents seldom appreciate the extent or nature of services provided by the city in the absence of a well executed public relations program.

What is public relations? Public relations is a perception. For municipal officials, it is the accumulation of all contacts, attitudes, impressions, and opinions that constitute the relationships between City Hall and the citizens of the community.

The handshake of the mayor, the voice of the City Hall switchboard operator, the job done by the refuse collectors, and the promptness of responses to police emergency calls—all of these acts establish relationships with the public, and all contribute positively or negatively to the sum total of public opinion about the city and its effectiveness.

Council-Manager Relationships

Few medium-size or smaller cities can afford to hire a staff person whose sole function is public relations. This responsibility thus will likely rest primarily with the city administrator.

In his or her role of public relations officer, the administrator must bear in mind the fact that the city council is the focal point of attention. In the city council, interests converge from within City Hall and from individual citizens and special interest groups. Since the council's work is both regular and public, the convergence of these influences is highly visible.

A good administrator will make the most of his or her association with the council. In fact, it is difficult to distinguish between good public relations and good public administration. Basically, if the administrator attends to the "Ps and Qs" of public administration, he probably will be regarded as conducting a successful public relations campaign.

The following key points should be observed by the administrator in pursuit of better public relations via the council.

The administrator should place the welfare of the city above the fulfillment of personal ego needs.

A wise administrator will remain cognizant of the difference between his administrative functions and the policy functions of the council.

The administrator should not meddle in politics.

The successful administrator works diligently to earn and keep the confidence of the city council. How does a well-meaning city administrator accomplish this objective?

Preparation

Perhaps the most important element in good relations between the public and the city council is commonly known as “homework.” Most successful administrators regard thorough preparation as the best way to win the ball game.

Proper preparation requires thorough research, consideration of all of the alternative solutions to the problem, and final decisions made on the basis of sound reasoning and factual information. This approach will do more to influence a council’s decision than emotional haranguing, and it will leave the council in a position to answer inquiries from contentious citizens. Policies recommended by the administrator will come to be considered by the council in a respectful light, and more likely, a favorable one as well. Occasional gambles on snap decisions, when there is not time to adequately prepare, must be kept to a minimum.

Selling the Mayor and Council

Just as surely as a good city administrator should work to subdue his own ego, he must work diligently to promote the mayor and council at every opportunity. This requires giving constant credit to the council for their accomplishments and sound policy decisions. (However, the administrator must stop short of getting involved in elections and council campaigns.) Conversely, if the administrator recommends a policy which results in excessive citizen complaints, he or she should shield the mayor and council by publicly taking the blame.

The astute administrator will take care to never criticize councilmembers behind their backs. Honest differences of opinion are bound to occur between the council and the administrator from time to time, but these should be discussed and resolved privately. The result will be to project a public image of teamwork between the council and the administrator and the city staff.

Good Council Communications

The administrator needs to keep the city council abreast of developments at City Hall. For example, if an employee is fired for embezzling city funds, councilmembers should be immediately advised of this action by the administrator, rather than finding out through the news media. Open lines of communication between the council and the administrator will make the council aware of the smooth functioning of the administration; at the same time, good communications can alleviate the potential for rumors and half-truths which can be destructive to a harmonious relationship.

Planning and Conducting Council Meetings

The council meeting is the forum within which the abilities and skills of the administrator are tested. In the public setting, citizens who attend council meetings view the interactions between the councilmembers and the administrator as the basic mechanism by which city business is accomplished. Effective interaction among the players will result in productive council meetings and municipal progress.

To accomplish this end, the administrator should take care to thoroughly brief the council on matters that will be considered at each meeting. An advance agenda is not only necessary, but also a valuable tool to assist councilmembers in educating themselves on

upcoming decisions. When particularly complex or difficult issues are to be considered, supporting papers will be particularly useful to the council.

Relationships With the News Media

The news media—and, particularly, newspapers, radio and television—are indispensable to a good public relations campaign. The first principle the administrator must understand is that what he or she considers news may be vastly different from what local media representatives regard as news. However, each in his own way wants to work to keep the public informed of events important to the community.

To help bridge differences that may arise between City Hall and the news media, the administrator may wish to consider the following suggestions.

Be sensitive to media deadlines for filing articles for publication in the newspaper or preparing stories for TV or radio broadcast.

Avoid preferential treatment of any particular reporter or news medium. Give all an equal chance to cover the event.

Arrange special briefings for media representatives to provide full details on complicated issues. Printed handouts which provide an overview of all the pertinent facts will be appreciated and insure accurate reporting.

Like all good public relations officers, the administrator's work will often be seen, but he or she will not. A good rule of thumb is to keep the mayor and members of the council in the foreground whenever possible. Newspersons regard elected officials as the leaders of the city governments and expect them to speak for the city. The administrator's job is to be sure that elected officials are adequately prepared to field the questions from the media.

How to Handle a Media Crisis

If you are a city manager, it is only a matter of time before your city faces a media crisis. You don't want to mishandle a crisis. You will be crucified if you do! One very important thing is: don't go into denial. Meet the crisis head on.

The March 2000 Harvard Management Communication Letter (pp. 7-10) provides some advice on how managers can deal with a media crisis.

1. Be Prepared – Form a crisis management team and charge members with identifying various negative scenarios that could likely befall your city. Hold mock press conferences; draft sample press releases and keep them on file so they can be quickly adapted and used. Members of the team should develop relationships with the media when the city is not under scrutiny. The team should see the media not as a threat but as something they can use.

2. Marshall Your Forces – If the media doesn't know about the problem yet, get the word out to your people bring them in so they can help you resolve the issue. Make sure that any member of your crisis management team who might come into contact with the media is believable.

3. Perception Is Reality and Don't Lie - Accept the validity of the media's perception. Work on the perceived problem and then embark on some trust building. Remember that it is critically important to tell the truth. If you lie, the media will catch you and you will lose all credibility for the future. You can omit, but you can never lie.
4. Disseminate Friendly Evidence and Do It Fast – Don't say, "No comment." It only fuels the media frenzy and rumors will run rampant. A more gracious reply would be, "It would be inappropriate for me to talk about that."
5. Keep it Simple and Don't Say too Much – While saying nothing invites bad press, saying too much can also lead to trouble. Be helpful, but only to a point. The challenge the interviewee faces is to make the point clearly and simply. If you don't, the reporter may simplify it in a way you won't like.
6. Don't Nod – A special point for television. Don't nod to indicate that you understand what the interviewer is saying. It could be easily misconstrued by viewers as agreement with the point.
7. Practice and Prepare – Spending time thinking about the messages you want to emphasize will help you. Practice and perfect them. Also do some research on the reporter. Read some of his/her recent articles, which can easily be collected through one of the electronic news libraries.

Maintaining a Good Image With the Citizenry

The knowledgeable administrator will see that everything connected with the city is properly identified. Chances are, the city already has traditional municipal colors and a municipal "seal" or "logo" that the administrator cannot change. This is just as well, because it is not nearly so important what these colors or identifying insignia are, as it is how they are used. All city equipment, with the exception of certain equipment used for surveillance or undercover work, should be clearly marked and easily identified as being city property and marked as to the department which operates that equipment. All equipment must be well maintained and kept clean.

If the city does not have official colors or insignia, these should be established with the help of local civic organizations. If the decision is to make these designations from scratch, a little publicity will attract plenty of volunteers from the community. A council-appointed citizen committee can provide the answer in both cases, with attendant good will won for the city administration.

Communications: Telephone

Most contacts to City Hall will probably be through the telephone, and the most important incoming calls will involve complaints. It is impossible to place too much emphasis on the proper handling of such calls. An inexperienced employee can quickly convince the citizen that he or she "can't fight City Hall"; while a properly trained employee can convince the complaining citizen that the complaint has been heard, that the complaint will receive attention, and if possible the problem will be solved.

Communications: Speaker's Bureau

Particularly in smaller cities, the members of clubs and other organizations represent a large percentage of the city's population and a substantial proportion of the most civic-minded residents. A well-organized speaker's bureau within the city organization, and one which represents all departments, can find a ready audience among these groups.

Over the period of a year, interested citizens can be told about the city's services program by departmental employees who are conducting the work. In addition, these speaking engagements give municipal officials an opportunity to get feedback and community opinion about various city services and programs.

Communications: Council Meetings

To many citizens, visits to council meetings are a mystery of events and speeches and arguments. A well-prepared agenda, together with a standardized brochure, which introduces the citizen to the functions of the city council and its meetings, can prove invaluable to residents attending their first council meeting. This literature should identify the city officials involved with the meeting, explain the order of business, how decisions are made, and how the citizen can speak on the issues if he or she desires to. In addition to having the literature such as described above and copies of the agenda for that specific meeting available, another suggestion is to post a copy of the council procedures on a bulletin board in or near the entrance to the council chamber.

Special Interest Groups

An effective public relations program is highly dependent on feedback—the articulation of public reactions to municipal policies and services. By maintaining an open line of communication with various groups in the community, the administrator can reap a rich harvest of feedback.

In a smaller community with a limited administrative staff, the administrator will be unable to attend to every detail of a public relations program, but he or she should budget some of his or her time to work personally with various special interest groups to prevent wasted motion in reaching the wrong objectives. The following suggestions may be helpful to an administrator in obtaining public feedback on city decisions and policies.

Identify all of the civic organizations and groups in the community. Complete a card file which provides a rundown on each organization; the name of the group, its objectives or purposes, place and time of meetings, and sources of funding.

Establish communications by arranging to meet with the various groups to informally discuss the city's objectives and the role of the particular group in achieving those objectives.

When items of immediate interest to the group are to be discussed at a council meeting, an invitation should be issued to the group to attend and participate.

In most smaller communities, the chamber of commerce is an especially influential public interest organization. Despite the possible areas of conflict between the chamber and the city, here is a relationship that offers a great potential for productive partnership. The administrator should pursue innovative ways to cooperate with the chamber to

encourage industrial development, downtown renewal, tourism, and successful capital improvements programs.

The administrator should establish an informal arrangement with the chamber's executive staff under which the city can produce technical information for use by the chamber in attracting industry and tourists. In return, chamber officials can be of assistance in persuading business leaders to support city bond issues and other city programs.

Municipal Reporting

The best municipal service program in the world will be of limited public relations value if the city fails to report its progress to the public. This section discusses types of reports that can be used to publicize the city's progress.

Types of Reports

Although the following reports could conceivably be lumped together into one composite document, it is generally advisable to break them out into individually bound reports to avoid overwhelming the reader with a bulky digest of details. It can also be useful to release these various reports at different times throughout the year, thus keeping the city's accomplishments in the public's eye.

The city's annual report should highlight the past year's activities of the city government, as well as point out the city's objectives for the coming year. This could be coordinated with the consideration of the annual budget.

An economic report can be issued to business, financial, and industrial interests in the city, and used by the chamber of commerce to sell the city to prospective industries. It should contain information on the financial status of the city and other local governments, public facilities, the employment situation, the availability of raw land for industrial development, etc.

A social report is designed to cover human relations development in the community, and should touch on educational programs, recreation, housing and urban renewal, anti-poverty efforts, religious and welfare activities, and progress made by local ethnic groups.

Special reports may need to be prepared intermittently to explain policy changes to the public—such as the need to increase water rates or a change in solid waste collection operations or schedules.

Delivering the Message

Reports are only useful if they reach the public and are read. The following recommendations for improving the preparation and dissemination of reports and publications may be helpful.

- Use relatively large, unadorned type with wide margins for easy readability.
- Use frequent illustrations—professionally prepared color photographs whenever the budget allows or the message is too important to miss—to break up long, uninterrupted columns of copy.
- Be sure sentences are short with clear meanings.

- Let two or three people review the copy for clarity and simplicity before you go to press.
- An interesting cover design will increase the probability that the report will attract attention and be read.
- Don't depend on the public to come to City Hall looking for reports. Get them distributed in city-mailed water bills, by volunteer distribution from groups such as the Boy Scouts, or send speakers with brochures out to provide programs to local civic groups and clubs.
- By all means the city should develop a webpage which contains leads to the various programs, and current activities and announcements should be available over the Internet.

Conclusion

A city government is rarely better than the public's opinion of it. A conscientious administrator will be as conscious of his or her management responsibilities and commitment to public service as he or she is to the idea of promoting the effectiveness of both to the public.

Any administrator can build better public relations if he or she is willing to work to achieve them, for the image is a reflection of the success of the city—not merely a mirage. The administrator must inspire the staff and employees to adopt an attitude for courteous public service, while constantly serving as a model.