

Wodonga Council Communication Strategy, 2010-2011 to 2012-2013



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This strategy outlines the Wodonga Council's communication priorities from 2010-2011 to 2012-2013.

It analyses the methods of communication which are currently used by the council and their success in reaching key audiences, which include Wodonga residents and ratepayers, visitors to the city and those looking to live, work and invest in Wodonga.

The main emphasis of the strategy is to provide a greater understanding of online technologies which have become available in recent years, and Wodonga Council's role in using them as a two-way communication tool.

This strategy will ensure that Wodonga Council will take a staged and planned approach to communication at all levels with its community.

This planning is particularly important so the council can:

- Consider the financial implications of implementing, maintaining and enhancing communications with its community, including the need for extra resources implement and monitor social media;
- Put systems in place to ensure council officers can provide timely and meaningful responses to feedback, questions and customer requests which are received;
- Measure and evaluate the ways it communicates and look for opportunities for improvement; and
- Stay abreast of other developments in communication as they become available.

During the course of the strategy, new technologies will become available and it is important the council has the ability to examine these closely and gauge the benefit to the organisation. It is also vital that council uses its existing communications methods and evaluates their ongoing role and effectiveness, tailoring them to a changing environment where necessary.

2. OVERVIEW:

As a local government body, it is important that Wodonga Council provides the opportunity for two-way communication on a wide range of issues.

Doing this allows the council to make more informed decisions, plan for the future and have a clearer direction on what residents expect from the council.

Traditionally, the methods which have been used by the council have been of informing people, rather than providing avenues for two-way communication.

Advancements in technology mean that social media has given people different forums in which they can communicate and engage with various government bodies, businesses and people.

Many other councils have begun using social media as a communication tool and believe it has added to the democratic process by allowing residents to become more engaged with their council. It also allows councillors and council staff to receive information which assists the process of advocacy.

While there are risks involved with using this new technology, a planned and staged approach is necessary to ensure these are minimised. These risks are outlined later in the strategy.

It is also important that staff and councillors have a good understanding of what their role is in communicating with people, responding to comments and requests and what the expectations are in terms of the timeliness of a response. This is explained further in the strategy.

A social media policy will be developed in conjunction with this strategy, also incorporating the council's existing media policy.

The council's IT policy will also be amended to reflect these changing needs.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STRATEGY:

This strategy is necessary to make the best use of the communication mechanisms which have become available through changing technology.

Trends which have led to the strategy's development include:

- Online technology is increasingly popular for people to communicate with organisations and have organisations communicate with them. The technology allows for more two-way conversations, rather than informing people in just a one-way conversation.
- Research also shows that current generations like to receive their messages electronically. People are constantly logging on during the day to see what is happening.
- Newspapers are suffering declining circulation; so, it is important that the council looks at others ways of getting its messages out to people.
- Utilising online technology will enable the council to have more immediate effectiveness in responding to negative and incorrect media.
- Where the council is aware that it is going to receive negative media, technology enables it to prepare responses which can be quickly distributed to online users.
- Feedback from the community which was undertaken in 2009 as part of the council plan process identified that people wanted the council to engage with them more.
- This council planning process also identified that the most common way people currently heard about council events and activities was the council's *CityLife* publication, newspapers, the council website and other media, such as television and radio. Therefore, it is important that they are maintained and continually improved upon.

4. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STRATEGY:

AIM: To ensure that Wodonga Council is consistently delivering the right message.

HOW WE WILL DO THAT: By working closely with councillors and Exec to ensure we are sending out timely messages on projects, events and council happenings. All messages will be co-ordinated by the staff in the council's communications unit to ensure the messages are consistent.

AIM: That this message is being delivered to the right audience in the most accessible format.

HOW WE WILL DO THAT: By taking into account latest data which shows the demographics of the Wodonga community and ensuring that all publications are available, on request, in different languages and large print format.

By keeping abreast of changing technology and using it, where suitable, to reach different audiences.

AIM: That this message is given in the most cost-effective, responsible and publicly accountable way.

HOW WE WILL DO THAT: By researching the costs and using those that provide best value for money on all communications.

AIM: To ensure the community, councillors and staff are informed of all decisions, policies, programs, events and issues in a timely, accurate and consistent manner.

HOW WE WILL DO THAT: It is the responsibility of the communications team to ensure it stays abreast of all council decisions and policies and events and happenings and shares those with the community. The communications team will use best practice in local government to ensure all sectors of the community are included in this process.

AIM: That emerging Wodonga Council or general local government media stories and issues are dealt with and responded to in a timely, accurate and appropriate manner.

HOW WE WILL DO THAT: Internal processes used in the *Communications Strategy* will ensure that the community and media will be given timely responses to their feedback. This will be done through the communications team in consultation with the appropriate business unit to ensure information is conveyed in a way that can be easily understood and is accurate.

AIM: That the professional image of the council is maintained and enhanced by the production of quality corporate documents.

HOW WE WILL DO THAT: The council has a style guide which is used for both editorial and marketing needs. The communications and marketing units will continue to promote appropriate use of the council's branding in all documents which are produced.

AIM : That an increased awareness of all stakeholders about the role of the council is developed.

HOW WE WILL DO THAT: The council will continue to use its current communications methods to inform people about the council and its areas of responsibility, particularly *CityLife*. The social media mechanisms will provide an alternate avenue for informing people and raising the profile of the council and what its role is and allow the council to reach a different audience.

5. WHAT WILL THE STRATEGY ACHIEVE?

Through all methods of communication, the strategy will send the message that:

- Wodonga Council is efficient and effective;
- Wodonga Council listens to the community when developing policy and programs;
- Wodonga Council works with the community when implementing policies and programs; and,
- Wodonga Council is providing and maintaining a thriving, inclusive and sustainable community.

The strategy will lead to more feedback being given to councillors and council officers, ensuring better use of finances, resources and decision-making processes.

It will enable the council to engage a different audience but will not alienate the audience it already reaches.

It will allow the council to inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower its residents, as per the community engagement policy adopted by the council in 2009.

6. WODONGA'S DEMOGRAPHICS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE STRATEGY:

- Wodonga has one of the youngest median age groups in Victoria, which indicates that most would embrace technology. Several of the tools outlined in the strategy are most popular among those aged 25 to 35 and 36 to 45.
- A significant number of these people also have young families so they are increasingly relying on these means of communications to stay informed and engaged. During the council planning process, they indicated they were unable to attend meetings held at night or get more involved in council decisions because of the pressures placed upon them by family demands.
- Wodonga also has a large number of shift workers. Because of the nature of their work, they are unable to attend some of the more traditional events, such as after-hours forums, council meetings, etc. Offering online forums would provide them with an avenue for being involved in giving the council feedback.
- When consultations take place with community for the next Council Plan, it will be important to re-evaluate how effectively the Communications Strategy is working and talk to members of the community about what other tools they would like to see implemented as technology would have changed significantly again by that time.

7. HOW HAVE WE COMMUNICATED IN THE PAST?

In the past, the most frequently used communications tools have relied on an assortment of the ones listed below.

Tool	Description	How effective have they been?
Media releases	Used to inform local and metropolitan media about council-related announcements, events and issues.	Media releases are constantly picked up by the local media outlets, and this has assisted in increasing awareness of the council with the community.
Press conferences/briefings	Used to brief media on issues where there is likely to be significant press interest.	Always well attended by media.
Media alerts	A brief description of an event which may be of interest to the media.	Have good responses through media outlets.
Speeches	Usually issued by the Mayor, councillors or CEO for launches and opening events.	Have proved a good way of raising the profile of councillors and council staff.
Interviews	One-on-one interviews focusing on a specific issue, announcement or achievement.	Have played a major role in raising the profile of council events and activities.
<i>CityLife</i> community newsletter	Issued once a month to all households in the Wodonga municipality.	Has proved an effective way of getting council messages to residents and assisting community groups in promoting their events.
Wodonga Council website	Updated regularly with information, mainly about council services, events and news.	Website statistics show that the site receives an average of 2000 hits per week.
Community noticeboards	Used to promote council events and programs and items of interest. Updated on a fortnightly basis.	Good method of value-adding to the marketing and communication of events and activities.

Tool	Description	How effective have they been?
Signage and flags	Signage is located around city advertising council facilities and events.	Constantly mentioned in event surveys as a way people heard about an activity.
Conventional mail	Letters sent each year not currently measured. Letters received by the council each year is more than 32,000.	A traditional, but sound way, of reaching audiences for which we have existing databases.
Emails	An average of 27,000 emails received each month. An average of 13,000 emails sent each month.	A good way of reaching audiences and allowing people to communicate with councillors and council officers.
Phone calls	Currently, more than 94,000 calls are received by the council's customer service centre each year. This does not take into account staff contacted directly. The measure for outgoing calls averages about 12,000 per month.	A traditional, but sound way, of communicating with people.
Council column	This bi-monthly column appears in the <i>Express</i> newspaper.	Minimal impact but another way of ensuring messages are conveyed to the community.
Documents and records	Council documents, such as the <i>Council Plan</i> and <i>Annual Report</i> , are available for viewing at the library, council foyer, community centres and website.	Required under legislation.

Tool	Description	How effective have they been?
Advertising	The council regularly advertises in all local newspapers, as well as on the radio stations and television networks.	Some advertising is required by legislation. Other forms of advertising are good, but sometimes expensive, ways of getting messages out.
Foyer TVs	TV sets are in the foyer promoting council events and activities.	Good but restricted to those who come into the council offices for business.
Marketing material	Using flyers, posters, etc, to promote awareness of council activities and events	Frequently mentioned in surveys as one of the main ways in which people learn about council activities and events.
Specific newsletters	Several council business units currently have newsletters to their target groups, including Active News, HACC newsletter, Meals on Wheels newsletter.	Effective way of engaging target groups through providing specific information.
Youth specific tools, including Facebook page.	Allows 'friends' to be invited to events.	Largely under-utilised but has potential for improvement.
State-wide community surveys	A market sample of the population is surveyed each year and the results compared to those from like-sized councils	An important ongoing measure of the council's performance.

8. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS?

The current methods are valuable and should be maintained.

However, the council's reliance has been on using print mediums, whether they are newspaper articles and advertisements, newsletters, flyers and posters.

With research showing that less people are using newspapers as a source of information, a change in direction is necessary.

Social mediums are largely an untapped market for Wodonga Council.

They have been used to some extent with the youth audience but this can be expanded to include more events and activities.

Everyday activities which people are becoming more familiar with doing online with other organisations – such as filling out online surveys, receiving payment reminders, receiving newsletters and providing input into discussion on decisions – has not been done to any great extent.

When the Wodonga Council has tested such tools, they have proved successful.

This would indicate that this is the way of the future and an area where resources and investment is required to make Wodonga a leader in this area.

9. WHAT ARE OTHER COUNCILS DOING?

Many councils, mainly those based in metropolitan areas, have already utilised some of the social communications methods which are available.

Discussions held with these councils can be summarised as:

- It is important that proper resourcing is put into place as users expect quick responses (within two working days) to their queries;
- Staff policies must be written and promoted so all staff are aware of the protocol behind using social media mechanisms;
- Using some of the social media tools can present risks in what things written are in the public domain, although they can be quickly deleted if necessary;
- When usage guidelines are established, such as for participating in forums, etc, these are generally well followed;
- For the expense required in broadcasting council meetings, most felt it had not been worth the investment. On average, less than 10 people were watching the meetings live, but if an issue was controversial, it would receive many viewings after the event. A separate report has been done on streaming council meetings, both live and delayed, and podcasting of council meetings.

10. WHAT IS THE CURRENT PERCEPTION ABOUT HOW THE COUNCIL COMMUNICATES?

- Surveys and feedback from the community, particularly in the Council Plan consultation which was carried out in 2009, show that people rely on CityLife, the council's website and the media to gain their information. Other mediums were also mentioned to a lesser degree.
- At events, advertising, flyers and associated marketing materials are often mentioned as the main ways in which people heard about council activities.
- Word of mouth remains an effective way of promoting events and the great advantage of social communications is its viral effect.
- Feedback given in the lead-up to the 2009 council elections indicates that people feel the council can improve its communication and advocacy.
- Results from community surveys in recent years have shown a declining result in terms of the council's advocacy; however, adverse media about council decisions in the lead-up to these surveys would have affected this perception.

Regardless of how well the council communicates, there will always be a sector of the community which considers it has not been involved sufficiently in decision-making or feels it has not been advised about council events and happenings.

11. WHAT IS THE FUTURE?

- Research done in the United States shows that the internet and social media are the way of the future.
- Newspapers and printed material with charged cover prices are showing declining circulation.
- More publication companies are putting resources towards the online market.
- The US is considered to be about three years ahead of Australia in terms of the technology it offers and government officials at all tiers have been quick to embrace this in terms of getting their messages out and receiving feedback from their constituents.
- In the US, and to a lesser extent, the UK, public relations positions are now advertised as online communications officers and their role is very much focused on updating and enhancing social media mechanisms such as Facebook sites, Twitter, organising YouTube messages and using online forums as a way of receiving feedback.
- Hard copy surveys are now a limited area with most companies opting for online versions.

To truly embrace online technology at Wodonga Council, it is necessary that constant research is undertaken in terms of emerging technology and analysing how this would bring the council benefit.

A great advantage of online technology is that statistics, through Google alerts, Zoomerang, etc, are readily available.

This means it will be particularly easy to see how effective the council is being by measuring hits on websites, the number of people joining our online community, time spent looking at pages, participants in forums and so on.

12. WHAT ARE THE RISKS INVOLVED?

Risks	Likelihood	Consequence	Rating	Mitigation Action
Adverse comments are made about councillors or council staff in the public domain using social media	C	4	Moderate, but could be high depending on the comments made.	Forums will be moderated to view comments before they can be posted. Any comments considered derogatory will be removed from public viewing.
Staff do not respond to comments within the timeframe promised	C	3	Moderate	Full staff training on their role and the expectations upon them will be given before the strategy goes 'live'
The popularity of the communications methods means staff are inundated with customer requests and feedback but do not have the resources to deal with this	C	3	Moderate	Continual monitoring using the measures outlined will act as a gauge of resourcing levels. Full staff training will be given so staff are aware of what the response expectations are.

Risks	Likelihood	Consequence	Rating	Mitigation Action
Council footage or online materials are 'doctored' to present the councillors or council staff in an unfavourable light	C	3	Moderate	Constant monitoring of the way the council's communication messages are used will occur and legal action taken if it is defamatory or misused.
Criticism from ratepayers and residents that the strategy is a waste of money	C	3	Moderate	The communication strategy is an important way of enabling residents to become more engaged with the council and any costs would be outweighed by benefits.
There is poor take-up of the new communication methods	C	3		Measures would be put in place to ensure resources are allocated to support the areas they are needed most.

Note: Legend to codes used above

Likelihood		Consequence		Risk Rating						
				Consequence						
				Likelihood		1	2	3	4	5
Almost Certain	A	Catastrophic	5		A	M	M	H	H	E
Likely	B	Major	4		B	L	M	M	H	E
Possible	C	Moderate	3		C	L	L	M	H	H
Unlikely	D	Minor	2		D	L	L	M	M	H
Highly Unlikely	E	Negligible	1		E	L	L	L	M	M
Implications for action of risk rating										
EXTREME (E) Action required immediately Councillors attention required				HIGH (H) Director's attention required						
MODERATE (M) Manager's attention required				LOW (L) Manage through usual processes						

13. HOW WILL THE COUNCIL PROVIDE TIMELY RESPONSES?

Currently, members of the public can post customer requests by:

- In person at the council's customer service centre;
- By phoning the council's customer service centre or relevant council officer;
- By writing to the council or relevant council officer;
- By emailing the relevant council officer;
- By emailing info@wodonga.vic.gov.au which is widely promoted on the council's website, with the emails reaching a central database before being distributed to the relevant council officers, who is expected to respond within five working days.

The future approach:

All the above avenues for feedback will be maintained.

The communication strategy opens up more opportunities for the public to correspond with the council, with most of it appearing in a public domain which means others can see the request and the council's response.

All correspondence received via the communication methods will be viewed each business day by the communications staff.

Communications officers will be responsible for providing a response within two business days, which will give them the opportunity to find out the correct information, have it checked and post the response.

All responses should come through the communications team to ensure consistency of message.

Should it require following up by another officer, a customer service request will be posted from the communications officer to the relevant colleague using the Pathways system.

If a response or issue is considered more immediate, it will also be posted to the relevant director for their attention and action.

14. HOW WOULD WE IMPLEMENT THE STRATEGY?

A marketing campaign would be necessary.

This would be supported by media coverage about what the council is doing.

The social mechanisms outlined in this strategy will play a vital role.

Many of them have a flow-on effect in that the council can play a proactive role by inviting people to become a part of the online community, and then by asking those people to invite others.

The council's webpage would be altered with a strip banner asking people: 'Do you wish to join our online community? '

By pressing on this banner, people will be given the option to receive the council's Twitter messages, register to receive publications by email, become the council's Facebook friend, etc.

The *CityLife* publication would also include articles about the online community and a printed link where people can register for the online community.

Marketing material produced for all council events would include a promotional line about the online community and encourage people to go to the relevant website for more information.

Over time, this will lead to a change of culture where people know the website as the main source of information and this will lead to cost benefits due to a smaller number of printed materials having to be produced.

15. WHAT MEASURES WILL BE USED TO ENSURE IT IS WORKING?

It is important to examine the methods we are using on a regular basis to determine their effectiveness or otherwise.

There are many ways to evaluate but some of these include:

- The number of hits on our websites;
- The number of people who join our online communications network;
- The number of people who register to receive rates and registration notices online;
- The number of times the council appears on Google Reader and other online measures;
- The number and nature of survey responses we receive, including the online responses versus hard copy;
- Community survey results;
- Media clips;
- Number of phone calls inquiring about particular issues;
- The number of submissions received about items which we communicate with our community about;
- The number of people who attend focus groups and events; and,
- Editorial space versus advertising rate.

These measures and their use in the strategy are outlined in detail under the communications strategy timeline.

16. HOW DO WE ENSURE EQUAL ACCESS TO INFORMATION?

Wodonga is a diverse community, and the multicultural profile of the city is increasing. The population is also expected to have a higher proportion of aged residents in the future.

Because of this, all council documents and publications and electronic files will be available, as requested in:

- Large print;
- Audio tape;
- Braille;
- Electronic formats; and,
- Different languages or as an interpreted version if requested.

As standard practice, the council will ensure the following:

- Website pages are accessible to people with a range of disabilities;
- Documents and publications are written in a consistent style, using simple language and avoiding council jargon; and,
- Font styles are easily read and consistent across the council and where practicable, at least 11 point size.

17. COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TIMELINE:

Tool	Description	Implementation	Cost	Responsible area
Twitter	<p>As deemed appropriate by the communications adviser, messages would be sent out alerting people to events and other items of interest. In most instances, further information would be available on the council website and the Twitter message would provide a link to this.</p> <p>In the case of an emergency, Twitter would be used as a way of updating people about the situation.</p>	2010-2011 financial year	Nil over life of strategy	Communications
Facebook	<p>Wodonga Council Facebook page established, featuring councillors and used to promote council events through a network of friends</p>	2010-2011 financial year	Nil over life of strategy	Communications

Tool	Description	Implementation	Cost	Responsible area
Bulk SMS	Text messages are sent to an identified database of people with the information they have requested. A campaign will be held through CityLife and the customer service centre asking people to register their mobile telephone numbers to messages can be sent. People can specify what information they would like – reminder notices about rates and animal registrations, events, etc.	2010-2011 financial year	\$1000 for first year of the strategy, and \$2000 thereafter each year.	Communications and IT
Student web pages	Dedicated web pages would be put on the City of Wodonga site with information relevant to primary school-children	2010-2011 financial year	\$1000 in first year, \$200 each year thereafter	Communications and early years.
CityLife	CityLife to be revamped and include more pages, with greater focus on community events and activities, including a community diary.	2010-2011 financial year	An additional \$20,000 a year (total of \$60,000) in the first year and then a further \$2000 a year thereafter.	Communications, in conjunction with all council business units.

Tool	Description	Implementation	Cost	Responsible area
You Tube	<p>Young people with an interest in film-making would be employed on a casual basis to film social marketing messages.</p> <p>A regular Mayoral message would also be broadcast monthly by the communications team.</p> <p>As determined appropriate by the communications adviser, other messages would be filmed and broadcast.</p>	2010-2011 financial year	Allow \$2000 each year	Communications and youth services
Co-operative agreement with TAFE and universities	Existing email networks in the Wodonga TAFE, La Trobe University and Charles Sturt University will be used to promote council activities, particularly those aimed at young people.	2010-2011 financial year	Nil	Communications and youth services.

Tool	Description	Implementation	Cost	Responsible area
School newsletter information for students	Information would be provided to schools for inclusion in their newsletter about things happening in the Wodonga community, such as the progress of projects, events and developments in the council. This was identified by children as a desired approach in research undertaken as part of the children's summit.	2010-2011 financial year	Nil	Early years and communications.
Rates notice brochure	A document which would be distributed with rates notices outlining what the council spends rates on – Your rates as work concept.	2011-2012 financial year	\$2000 each year	Finance and communications

Tool	Description	Implementation	Cost	Responsible area
Online forms and registrations	Forms will be made available so people can fill out the information and submit them electronically. A full review of the forms will take place so it can be ascertained which ones are best suited for electronic submission. This would also include having rates and registration notices issued electronically where the householder opts to do so.	2011-2012 financial year	Allow \$5000, some of which will be offset by printed savings.	Communications, IT and customer service
Online forums	Residents will be invited to take part in an online forum where they can discuss their thoughts on a proposed council project, give input into the council planning process, etc.	2011-2012 financial year	Allow \$5000 for first year, \$7500 in following years.	Residents are invited to take part in an online forum where they can discuss their thoughts on a proposed council project, give input into the council planning process, etc.

Tool	Description	Implementation	Cost	Responsible area
Community survey	The survey would be reinstated to take place every second year, however a review of the questions would be required to ensure they were relevant.	2012-2013 financial year	\$10,000	Community planning and communications-marketing
City of Wodonga website	Currently exists but industry advice is that websites should be updated at least every five years. Last update in 2007. This would include major revamp of layout, information, etc.	2012-2013 financial year	\$25,000	Communications and customer service
Youth website	To replace the former youth website, Wasabi, which went out of operation in 2007. To be designed by young people for young people. Also includes marketing to promote the website.	2012-2013 financial year	\$5000	Communications and youth services