



Communications for a New Council

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Welcome and congratulations to newly-elected and re-elected members of local government.

The great thing about local government is there is no level of public life that so directly involves issues that impact on the community, so it's essential for newly-elected members to quickly familiarise themselves with the issues facing their municipality and local government in the state.

One of the most important roles for elected members is to promote the interests of the community by facilitating regular and effective communication between the council and the community it represents.

Time for review

With a new council raring to go, it is a perfect time for councillors and council managers to review internal and external communication strategies and policies to ensure they underpin a well-run and professional sphere of government and invite confidence by the community, including the media.

Many of us who work in local government take for granted that the community understands what we do, however, the reality is many people have a limited understanding of the various services delivered by local government.

If your community is well informed of what council does, at least when they are asked to cope with something they may not be happy with, they will have a better understanding of why it is occurring, thus reducing the negative impact.

There are a few simple things to consider when reviewing your council's communication strategies:

- Does council have a procedure in place around its media spokesperson or spokespeople?
- Is your current media spokesperson equipped to be a good strong representative of council? If not, it may be worth considering media training to provide them with some practical tips for dealing with the media and to build their confidence.

- Are all council staff and councillors aware of the communication strategies and policies in place at council? It is essential that all levels of council are aware of the procedures around communication strategies, particularly crisis management.
- Is council adequately prepared for unexpected and sometimes serious events? If council does not have a solid crisis communications plan in place, it's time to review your existing strategy or develop a new one.

Time for change

Once you have established council's position on internal, external and crisis communications you can pin point areas that need improving and initiate change.

Communication policies and strategies are among the most important as they drive the public's perception of council and local government as a whole.

This is your chance to refresh the profile of your council so that the community is reassured of an efficient, effective and essential tier of government.

With over ten years experience as a journalist and media adviser, Becher Townshend is now a leading issues and crisis management consultant in Tasmania and managing director of Font Public Relations. Formerly the chief political reporter and commentator with The Advocate newspaper and prior to that, state political reporter for Southern Cross Television, Becher has extensive experience in print and electronic media. Becher has delivered media training to managers and professionals for eight years and he has won awards for journalism excellence in areas of business and tourism and received a Tasmanian gold award in Marketing Communications in the PRIA State Awards for Excellence.

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