

Be responsible for good communications

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KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE. Use a combination of outlets to reach them. And be responsive. These essentials of good communication are an important part of the job for people who manage local road and street operations. Communicating clearly and regularly with the public about policies or events that affect their use of the local transportation system helps set reasonable expectations for how that system meets their needs.

It also saves public agencies time and resources spent answering complaints and responding to negative press, says Consultant Al Guyant, who led a recent workshop on communication skills as part of the UW-Madison/APWA Public Works Supervisory certificate program. Guyant has experience developing and implementing communication plans for public sector organizations that need to deliver credible information to key audiences. He talks here about strategies public works managers can use to frame and deliver their messages effectively, whether in presentations before a board, a public meeting, or using media outlets to reach or alert the public.

Carl Weber, Public Works Director for the City of Janesville with 40 years of experience in local public works organizations also

discusses some of the strategies he follows when communicating with customers and other stakeholders about his department's operations.

Consistent and precise

Good communication starts with a consistent, practiced approach that local road officials follow whether communicating something routine or urgent. Guyant says it is especially critical during an unexpected storm event or other situation that affects public services. "Being prepared to communicate accurate, concise information reduces anxiety on the part of the public and improves cooperation," he notes, adding that everyone who provides statements should follow the same precise message.

Local governments might assign someone other than the public works director or highway superintendent to serve as official spokesperson. Choose a person who is comfortable making clear, succinct statements and answering questions in that same manner. "The top person in a department can be too busy in a crisis to handle all the demands of frequent communication with the media and other inquiries," Guyant says. "Relying on a staff member trained in communicating key information and fielding questions can improve the process for the public, the media and the agency."

Janesville's Weber grew into the communication role for public works as he started moving up the management ladder more than 30 years ago. Today, he routinely gives younger staff members the responsibility of making public presentations about projects they lead so they gain confidence as communicators. Weber says opportunities like that early in his career helped him acquire and improve his own skills over the years. "It's an important training ground for people who work with the public and represent local government," he notes.

Work with the media

From his first job as a field engineer for the City of Racine to managing public works departments in several Wisconsin and Illinois cities, Weber says he developed a practical approach to communicating with citizens and elected officials, but also with the media.

"I learned early on to establish a good rapport with local reporters so they got used to contacting me directly for answers," Weber explains. He advises other managers to respond when reporters call and call them when the agency has something of interest to share. "They need stories and helping them do their job helps me do mine."

Guyant agrees about the wisdom of developing a cordial working relationship with local print and broadcast media. He includes local bloggers on that list, new-media journalists who appeal to a certain segment of the audience that does not follow traditional outlets.

Multiple outlets

According to Guyant, those traditional outlets still reach about 50 percent of the driving public. Which means distributing a press release to print and broadcast media announcing a planned road closing or other action that affects travel routes remains a standard. But with fewer people subscribing to or reading their local paper, Guyant says local governments must communicate through multiple outlets, from mailings and simple flyers to websites and social media.

Many are low cost and help reinforce other communications. For example, Guyant suggests alerting the public about a bridge closing with posters displayed in schools, grocery stores, local taverns and churches, any place with steady traffic that allows the posting of announcements.

On the electronic front, municipal websites are becoming essential to communicating with the public as more people and businesses rely solely on electronic sources for



This public works page on the Janesville city website features news about projects, contact numbers, links to services and policies, a feedback tool and more.

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information. The sites give highway and public works departments a platform to post news about road projects, snow and ice policies, or other services. If kept up to date, Guyant says even a basic site gets the reputation as a dependable source for accurate information. "They are worth the investment of staff time and other resources because they provide the public with instant access to closings, policy and schedule changes, and other facts a street or highway department needs to communicate."

Electronic tools really do change the way his department communicates, says Weber. "It can be intimidating at first, but using web outlets in conjunction with newspaper, TV and radio, gives us a better chance to reach our audience," he explains. Besides posting on the city website, Janesville Public Works has active Facebook and Twitter accounts that younger staff members maintain. Members of the public also sign up to receive email blasts about snow emergencies, road closings or other public works-related news.

Room for feedback

Including a response mechanism on a municipal website or department page helps strengthen the connection with the public. Weber describes the comment tool on the City of Janesville website as a source of useful feedback.

"Citizens can alert us right away via email to a bad pot hole or burned-out street light that we don't know about yet," he says. "I can direct resources to those problems more quickly and follow up."



Emergency road closings, snow and ice operations, and planned road projects that affect road users are some of the reasons local highway and street departments implement comprehensive communication plans.

Listen and be heard

Weber uses a strategy developed over many years of responding promptly and clearly to inquiries or complaints from citizens or elected officials. It is a standard he trains staff members to follow, along with using plain language in their replies. "We can't assume the public knows what we know or understands our technical terms," he says. "They want and deserve a clear explanation or answer when they contact us."

Weber also makes it a rule to communicate with city leaders, letting them know what he is communicating to local residents.

Understanding the capacity of the audience—local residents, council members, heads of other city departments and all city employees—to "hear" a message is an overlooked aspect of successful communications, says Guyant. He divides the audience into three basic groups, starting with the 20 percent of people who already know or agree with the information they hear. People unaware of the topic but receptive to the message account for 60 percent of a typical audience. And Guyant

describes another 20 percent as unreachable for various reasons, like having a strong bias about the message or difficulty comprehending it. Knowing this helps local governments fine-tune communications and send them through an effective combination of outlets.

Fundamental responsibility

Good and consistent communication with the public provides a level of customer service that benefits agency operations. It is easier for staff members out plowing streets, managing work zones or providing general road maintenance to interact with members of the public who have ready access to information and reasonable expectations about snow and ice operations, planned detours or other policies that affect them.

Public agencies are responsible for providing services and protecting public safety. As Weber and Guyant suggest, sharing information with the public is a fundamental part of that responsibility. ■

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Consultant Al Guyant offers tips on communication tools and strategies.