

Local Government Communication: Past, Present and Challenges for the Future

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Early PR in Britain

- the growth of local government from 1920's
- film documentaries about public services
- “... Democratic duty to educate and inform the wider public about councils and public institutions”
- “... a partnership between the citizen, the elected representative and the local government officer”

Institute of Public Relations

- Founded 1948
- Core founders “the municipal group”
- Public relations should be “in the public interest”
- Duty to maintain trust between council and its publics
- Truth and Accuracy - the best weapons

By 1970

- Only a few councils in Britain had PRs
- Most were former journalists
- Their job .. to provide information to the press and public
- Also to promote their town, city, area
- Main channel of communications - the printed press, local and national newspapers, radio and TV

1975 UK Councils Reorganised

- Bains Report
- “We are in no doubt that local authorities have a duty to inform the community of their activities”
- Every council should have a full time PR and information unit
- Also communications support for elected councillors
- Promote strong internal communications with staff

New Local Government Act 1972

- Allowed councils to.... “fund, provide and publish information to the public about local services and the functions of the council”
- Councils tested what is information” - a political challenge
- London Education Authority “What do you get if you subtract £75 million from London’s education budget”
- Greater London Council (GLA) “Say No to No Say”
- Edinburgh District Council “Improving Services, Creating Jobs”

Local Government Publicity

- Information cannot be persuasive or political
- Information cannot be slogans
- Local government publicity is “any communication in whatever form addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public”
- Senior staff, including PROs who communicate with the press and the public were “politically restricted”
- Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity - first introduced in 1988

The Code, revised 2011 England

- Strict parameters on “content, style and cost” of any local authority publicity
- Introduction to the Code “... Local authority publicity is important to transparency and to localism
- the public need to know what their local authority is doing (and why it is doing it) if they are to hold the local authority to account”
- Free council newspapers/magazines to residents - four a year maximum

Opening-up councils

- Press had access to council meetings since 1908
- From 1980s, public had right to attend as observers council and committee meetings
- Few members of public attended
- Several Councils webcasted live their meetings
- Few watched the webcast live or downloaded later
- Also Freedom of Information Act 2000 - public right to obtain from councils reports, letters, emails, notes of meetings and discussion

PR in Councils at year 2000

- Most of Britain's then 450 councils had a PR team
- Concentrated on media relations and public information
- MORI research found ..
-Most residents knew little about their local council
- ...confusion about who ran specific local services
-residents who are better informed, generally satisfied
-specific services gained higher satisfaction scores than the council itself

Defining PR and Reputation

SUE WOLSTEMHOLME, FORMER CIPR PRESIDENT

“Public relations is about reputation,
the result of what you do,
what you say
and what others say about you”

Reputation Campaign 2005

12 Core Actions

- A highly visible, branded council cleaning operation
- one phone number to report environmental problems
- Know the “grot spots” and deal with them
- Remove abandoned cars and fly-tipping in 24 hours
- Win ‘Green Flag’ award for a council car park
- Ensure no gaps or overlap in environmental contracts
- Educate and enforce to protect local environment

Reputation Campaign

5 Core Communication Actions

- Manage the media to promote and defend Council
- Provide an A-Z guide to council services
- Publish regular council magazine or newspaper
- Ensure brand is consistently linked to services
- Internal communications - make sure staff are informed

New Reputation Guide (2010)

3 Big Issues

1. Leadership
2. Brand
3. Communications

Five rules for building reputation

- Providing value for money
- Informing and engaging residents
- Building mutual trust, listening to local concerns
- Improving key council services
- Focus on changing lives ... tackling local issues of concern, lack of job opportunities, crime, anti-social behaviour

Focus on Reputation

- Trust in local councils increased
- In 2001 52% of public trusted their local council
- In 2012, 65% of public trusted their local council

Four Challenges for the future

- Embrace change and engage better locally
- Underline leadership
- Safeguard brand and reputation
- Put the public interest first in all we do

Embrace Change & Engage Locally

- Communications teams involved in any service changes, engaging with service users and staff
- Critical to engage locally, as fewer vote in elections
- Leading from the front on any public consultations
- Listening opens dialogue
- Wise up on data and digital channels
- Tailor council messages and websites to person
- Communications shifts from Town Hall to online.

Underline Leadership

- Local government is to be valued and proud of
- Councils/Mayors/Councillors are leaders in their area
- Culture of corporate leadership and engagement
- Communications Directors should have a strategic role (only one in three in England are at council top table)
- Communications placed to give 360 degree view

Safeguard brand & reputation

- Council brand resonates locally - it is trusted
- Reputation has to be monitored and safeguarded
- Communications Teams should be custodian of brand and reputation on behalf of their council
- Contractor branding should be replaced by joint council/contractor branding
- There must be a visible and tangible link between the council (its brand, logo) and its services

Putting public interest first

- Local services and council staff are there to serve public
- Council Communications and public relations must always be in the public interest
- Truth and accuracy are still the “best weapons”, perhaps more so in today’s digital world
- Always acting in the public interest, we as communicators will continue to hold the trust of the people we serve

Thank you.

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Local Government and Public Services”
(Kogan Page, 2013)*