

Mecklenburg County Communications & Marketing Plan

COMMUNICATIONS & MARKETING PLAN VISION STATEMENT

Mecklenburg County's goal is to be a helpful and interactive partner with the community. This can be achieved through a sensitivity to customer service and a clear commitment to meaningful and effective communication among and between citizens, employees, elected leaders and community organizations.

Additionally, the County must use communications and marketing as a proactive education tool to keep the community informed about how the County operates and the policies and procedures that are involved in that operation, and to encourage citizen participation in their local government process.

Finally, the County must strive continually to meet communications needs both internally -- among staff and the Board of County Commissioners -- and externally with the entire community.

GOALS

The Communications & Marketing Plan will support this commitment to customer service by achieving the following goals:

- ☐ Identifying customers and their information needs.
- ☐ Providing customers, including residents and employees, with timely and relevant information about County projects, activities and initiatives.
- ☐ Encouraging communication between customers, community groups, elected officials and County employees.
- ☐ Measuring the effectiveness of this plan to ensure communications methods meet community needs.
- ☐ Seeking the improvement of customer satisfaction with the County communications efforts.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

- ☐ Informed citizens who understand the County's mission and how to effectively access County services
- ☐ Informed employees who can be ambassadors for Mecklenburg County at work and at home
- ☐ Informed political and community leaders who view the County as an ethical, efficient and effective government
- ☐ Fulfillment of concepts of Vision Statement and Goals of Communications & Marketing Plan
- ☐ Community receives and agrees with the County's key messages that:
 - Mecklenburg County provides quality, professional services to the community;

- Mecklenburg County is a good place to work and live;
- Mecklenburg County government makes a positive and significant contribution to a safe, healthy, livable, prosperous, well-governed and unified community;
- Mecklenburg County government is well run;
- Mecklenburg County government is responsive to the needs of its residents;
- Mecklenburg County government is trying to reduce costs;
- Mecklenburg County government spends tax dollars wisely;
- Mecklenburg County government does a good job of communicating with residents;
- Information provided by Mecklenburg County government is reliable

STRATEGIES

Mecklenburg County will concentrate on three core processes for implementing its communications and marketing plan: Media Relations, Direct Communications, Internal/Employee Communications. Sub-processes of Creative Design/Production Services, and Administrative Support Services will support these core processes.

Media Relations:

Mecklenburg County will develop and maintain a close working relationship with reporters and editors from the local news media, as a means of proactively and reactively communicating and marketing Mecklenburg County's messages to customers. When appropriate, Mecklenburg County will proactively and reactively work with regional and national news media, and trade news media to communicate Mecklenburg County's messages. However, the primary focus of the media relations strategy will be working with local news media.

Direct Communications:

Mecklenburg County will proactively communicate with Mecklenburg County residents and selected target audiences to deliver the County's key messages, and to provide information customers want and need to be informed, educated and involved in their County government. Mecklenburg County will encourage and promote two-way communication with its customers.

Internal/Employee Communications:

Mecklenburg County will invest in and use a variety of tools to educate and inform County employees about County programs, activities and policies. Mecklenburg County will encourage and promote two-way communication between all levels of the organization.

IMPLEMENTATION

Strategy #1: Media Relations

The intent of this strategy is to use news media relations as only one part of a comprehensive plan. In fact, more emphasis should be given to taking messages directly to residents rather than relying on the news media to provide this information. However, it is recognized that the news media will continue to report on government activities and therefore

contribute to shaping ideas and opinions. The news media also can be helpful in communicating key messages. As result, ongoing media relations are needed. Successful media relations are developed through personal interaction with reporters and editors, distribution of news releases and media advisories, planning and conducting new conferences and interviews, placement of stories in various media, and other methods of communications. Below are the media relations goals and descriptions of some of the tactics that Mecklenburg County will implement in support of its media relations strategy.

MEDIA RELATIONS GOALS FOR FY2001

Meets Expectations

Average 50% of top ten story idea coverage by at least one media outlet

Observer positive coverage at least 123 stories

Percentage of positive stories from proactive efforts at least 92%

Neighbors positive coverage at least 84 stories

Total number of positive newspaper stories at least 250

Number of negative Observer stories no more than 60

No negative stories in Neighbors

Note: Must achieve 5 out of 7 to achieve standard

Exceeds Expectations

Average 60% of top ten story idea coverage by at least one media outlet

Observer positive coverage at least 150 stories

Percentage of positive stories from proactive efforts at least 95%

Neighbors positive coverage at least 100 stories

Total number of positive newspaper stories at least 300

Number of negative Observer stories no more than 40

No negative stories in Neighbors

Note: Must achieve 5 out of 7 to achieve standard

Exceptional Performance

Average 70% of top ten story idea coverage by at least one media outlet

Observer positive coverage at least 180 stories

Percentage of positive stories from proactive efforts at least 97%

Neighbors positive coverage at least 150 stories

Total number of positive newspaper stories at least 370

Number of negative Observer stories no more than 30

No negative stories in Neighbors

Note: Must achieve 5 out of 7 to achieve standard

TACTICS FOR ACHIEVING GOALS

Strongly emphasize the Charlotte Observer as the County's first choice of news media to deliver messages to the community.

Community survey data indicate a significant majority of Mecklenburg County residents look first to the Charlotte Observer as their primary source of information on Mecklenburg

County government. This strong emphasis on placing stories in the Charlotte Observer should involve placement throughout the newspaper (and Mecklenburg Neighbors), not merely via the government beat reporter. This initiative should be supported by one of the direct communications tactics of purchasing advertising within the newspaper for specific topics, including purchasing special section inserts.

Don't ignore TV.

As a medium, TV news was the second highest total response in the community survey data, when combining the three network TV news stations. It should be noted that twice as many respondents indicated that WSOC-TV was their primary and preferred source of information on County government as compared with WBTV. Based on current ratings and survey data, WCNC-TV is simply not generating a large enough viewership to be a significant factor at this time. Because WSOC-TV does not employ a dedicated government beat reporter (as does WBTV), special emphasis should be made to develop ties to the news department and even encourage a beat reporter. Beat reporters tend to bring a broader perspective and greater depth of knowledge to stories on local government.

The County should consider approaching WSOC-TV with special projects in which the TV station can partner with the County to address a community issue of importance.

Regular media briefings

Consideration should be given to holding regular (perhaps quarterly) news media briefings/backgrounders on the most important topics. Senior management and department directors should be involved in these briefings (particularly with editors and others not working the County beat). Regular visits to the editorial board of the *Charlotte Observer* and local newspapers board should be made by PS&I director, County Manager and other County officials to brief them on County activities. This also could be done quarterly, timed to coincide with significant issues of concern, such as the County budget

Build Relationships

As mentioned, successful media relations depend on relationships with members of the news media. The County's public information officers should regularly visit with reporters and editors to build these relationships.

Top Ten

Twice a month, Mecklenburg County's Public Service & Information Department will provide the news media an advisory on the top ten news stories ideas on County government for that two-week time. The story ideas can be related to events and programs, or could be stories that have not specific timing. Focus of these story ideas should be those messages that have been identified as the highest priorities by departments and core businesses.

Good Government

This monthly one-page newsletter is sent to the news media and general public by fax. The content is focused on positive aspects of County government that is largely overlooked by the news media. It is mainly intended to inform residents but also serves to remind the news media that there are numerous stories about County government that are not reported but which are important.

News Releases and Media Advisories

News releases and media advisories are provided on an as needed basis to begin the process of seeking media attention and coverage for story ideas. Releases and advisories should be followed up with personal phone calls or visits to maximize the potential for coverage.

News Conferences

These events should be reserved for major news announcements only. Overuse of news conferences dilutes the effectiveness of this tactic.

Coordinating with other Departments

Mecklenburg County's structure for implementing communications and marketing is a mix of a small centralized department and several decentralized operations. In lieu of the more desirable fully centralized operation, coordinating services among the various operations is essential to a more effective and efficient approach to planning and implementing communications and marketing. With the appropriate resources, the County's PS&I Department will serve as the coordination point for public information services.

Collaboration with City of Charlotte other agencies

The City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County have numerous partnerships to deliver community services. Included among those services are some communications/public information/public involvement partnerships requiring media relations. In such cases, the City of Charlotte Corporate Communications Department (and/or other City departments) and the Mecklenburg County Public Service & Information Department will collaborate to attain media relations goals.

Special Campaigns

Various County departments and agencies have special communications and marketing needs that require multiple approaches to reaching desired outcomes. In these instances, the County's PS&I Department develops and implements self-contained communications campaigns that combine to varying degrees – depending upon need – media relations, direct communications and internal communications.

Link with other core processes

As a matter of regular operations, it is imperative that each core process (media relations, direct communications, internal communications) be linked and coordinated to reach the intended audiences in several ways, obtaining multiple impressions. This multi-faceted approach maximizes exposure of the key messages.

Strategy 2: Direct/Citizen Communications and Outreach

Internet

As the popularity and use of the Internet grows, this medium will grow in its usefulness and applicability as a communications tool. The County continues to invest in its Internet site as a method of conducting business with its customers. As more people acknowledge that service, more opportunity will exist to provide these customers with key messages using the Internet.

Currently, the County's Public Service & Information Department publishes a number of information items on its home page site, including other direct communications and media relations materials described in this communications plan. PS&I will continue to seek opportunities to use the Internet as a communications tool, including interactive communications, as well as a method of promoting public involvement.

DIRECT/CITIZEN COMMUNICATIONS GOALS FOR FY2001

Standards for meeting expectations

- Majority of survey respondents believe:
- Mecklenburg County is effective and efficient in contributing to a safe, healthy, livable, prosperous, well-governed and unified community
- Mecklenburg County spends tax dollars wisely
- Mecklenburg County provides quality services to citizens
- Information received from Mecklenburg County can be trusted
- They know where to get information on Mecklenburg County government
- Mecklenburg County does a good job communicating with its citizens
- Mecklenburg Matters is useful
- Mecklenburg Forum is useful
- BOCC telecasts is useful
- State of the County Report is useful
- Internet information is useful

Standards for exceeding expectations

At least 70% of survey respondents believe:

- Mecklenburg County is effective and efficient in contributing to a safe, healthy, livable, prosperous, well-governed and unified community
- Mecklenburg County spends tax dollars wisely
- Mecklenburg County provides quality services to citizens
- Information received from Mecklenburg County can be trusted
- They know where to get information on Mecklenburg County government
- Mecklenburg County does a good job communicating with its citizens
- Mecklenburg Matters is useful
- Mecklenburg Forum is useful
- BOCC telecasts is useful
- State of the County Report is useful
- Internet information is useful

Standards for exceptional performance

At least 85% of survey respondents believe:

- Mecklenburg County is effective and efficient in contributing to a safe, healthy, livable, prosperous, well-governed and unified community
- Mecklenburg County spends tax dollars wisely
- Mecklenburg County provides quality services to citizens
- Information received from Mecklenburg County can be trusted
- They know where to get information on Mecklenburg County government
- Mecklenburg County does a good job communicating with its citizens
- Mecklenburg Matters is useful
- Mecklenburg Forum is useful
- BOCC telecasts is useful
- State of the County Report is useful
- Internet information is useful

TACTICS FOR ACHIEVING GOALS

TV programming

- **Public Information Shows**

PS&I produces a monthly, 30-minute TV newsmagazine titled, **Mecklenburg Forum**, which features community events, interviews, department updates, and behind the scenes features. The show is televised on the Government Channel and on WTVI, the local PBS affiliate. PS&I also produces a quarterly live call-in TV show that airs on WTVI. This show, **Mecklenburg Forum Live**, allows viewers to call in and speak with County government leaders and ask questions about services and activities. PS&I also produces the live telecast and rebroadcast of **Board of County Commissioners meetings**.

- **Special Meetings (Budget Public Hearing)**

PS&I also televises certain special meetings, such as the annual public hearing on the County Manager's Proposed Budget. Televising such meetings allows greater citizen access to information.

- **State of the County Address**

This program was first implemented in January 1996, with the chairman of the Board of County Commissioners holding a news conference reporting to citizens the State of the County. This project will continue to be timed to coincide with the County Commission=s annual planning for the upcoming fiscal year. The State of the County Address can be of great scope and detail, used to promote the successful activities of the previous year as well as to make citizens aware of community and Board priorities. State of the County Address is shown live on the Government Channel and is taped and replayed several times, also on the Government Channel. The event also results in significant news media coverage.

- **Video Text**

When time and resources allow, PS&I will produce video graphics and text to air on the government Channel. Examples of this can range from simple billboards of information about how to reserve a park picnic shelter, to more sophisticated features about how to become a foster parent or adopt a child.

Videos and Public Service Announcements

As a service to County departments and senior management, PS&I produces information and promotional videos that highlight various aspects of County government. Topical shows and public service announcements (PSAs) are produced periodically to highlight particular activities and to promote participation in County government. Videos are used by County departments to show directly to their clients; the videos also appear on the Government Channel as regular programming. **Use of videos is best considered as part of comprehensive communications & marketing plan.** Video requests will be compared with departmental communications objectives and key messages. Priority will be given to those requests that are the highest priorities described within each department=s communications plans, and those video projects requested as part of revising communications plans. It is estimated that with current resources PS&I can produce approximately 10-12 major videos in one calendar year.

Brochures and other printed materials

PS&I produces brochures and other printed materials for wide distribution throughout the County. PS&I also provides communications & marketing expertise to assist County departments in producing information/promotional brochures and videos. Use of brochures and videos is best considered as part of comprehensive communications & marketing plan. These service requests will be compared with departmental communications objectives and key messages. Priority will be given to those requests that are the highest priorities described within each department=s communications plans.

Collaboration with City of Charlotte other agencies

The City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County have numerous partnerships to deliver community services. Included among those services are some communications/public information/public involvement partnerships. Currently, the City of Charlotte Corporate Communications Department and the Mecklenburg County Public Service & Information Department have several partnerships as follows:

- **On Call**
- **Government Channel Programming and Promotion**
- **Internet Marketing**
- **Special Projects**
- **A – Z City/County Services Brochure**

As a result of these partnerships, the two departments must coordinate efforts to maximize potential.

A-Z Brochure

As part of its partnership with the City of Charlotte, PS&I co-produces an alphabetized brochure of City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County services to assist residents in finding the services they need and the contact points. The brochure is printed for distribution within the Charlotte Observer, with additional copies available for free at various locations and through the mail upon request.

Mecklenburg County Today or Keys to Your County

In a public/private venture, PS&I publishes a 60-page, full-color magazine on Mecklenburg County government services and other local issues/amenities. This magazine is published at no cost to taxpayers and is widely distributed for free. Advertisers pay the cost of production, while PS&I is responsible for the writing, design, layout and photography.

BOCC bio sheet

Upon the election of a new Board of County Commissioners, PS&I produces a one sheet, two-sided “flyer” containing short biographies of each county commissioner for distribution at public meetings and at various County facilities. The flyer also is inserted into the County’s employee newsmagazine to inform and educate employees about the Board.

Public Participation

On behalf of the Clerk to the Board’s Office, PS&I publishes a brochure listing all the volunteer advisory boards that provide advice and recommendations to staff and the Board of County Commissioners. This brochure assists residents in understanding the role and extent of citizens in local government, and informs residents of the specific responsibilities of various advisory boards, and how to apply to participate on an advisory board.

Newsletters

- **Good Government** – This is a one-page monthly fax newsletter that is sent to the news media and residents highlighting an aspect of County government that might not garner the spotlight of the news media but which extols the positive role and success of County government.
- **Commission Capsule** – This two-page fax bulletin is sent to Mecklenburg residents as a summary of the major decisions made by the Board of County Commissioners at its regular meeting. The Commission Capsule is “published” twice a month.
- **Calendar** – This publication is produced monthly, with several updates during the month, to inform the news media and the public about public meetings scheduled that relate to County government. This publication allows residents to learn what meetings are being held so they can decide to attend or follow up on the results of meetings.

CMUD inserts

Mecklenburg County publishes "Mecklenburg Matters," a monthly insert into City/County utility (CMUD) utility bills each month. PS selects topics&I based on information needs. Each County department should be involved in the process to market their services to the community.

Advertising

- **Ads**

PS&I utilizes paid and donated advertising as needed to reach target audiences with key messages.

- **Special Section Inserts/Citizens Report**

PS&I produces an annual report to citizens on the status and operation of County government. This report is printed as a special section in the *Charlotte Observer* and other newspapers to coincide with the January State of the County Address. The 8-page insert features accomplishments of the previous year and expected challenges and issues the County will face in the coming year. The County also will produce similar inserts for various other projects or communications campaigns.

Community Outreach/Public Participation Program

- **Mecklenburg County Fair** -- It is proposed that a one-day event be held each year to highlight the services of Mecklenburg County government, as a way of increasing public knowledge of and participation in Mecklenburg County government. The theme of the one-day event will be MECKLENBURG COUNTY FAIR. The Fair theme allows the best opportunity to showcase various aspects of county government, as well as provide considerable promotional and partnership opportunities. Below are preliminary ideas for how the Fair could be organized. The County Fair will be patterned after a street fair, such as Springfest, with information booths, food vendors and various activities described below. In addition to conducting business and providing information, the Fair will include entertaining, fun events that would encourage participation and educate at the same time.
Marketing/Publicity: The success of this event is tied directly to both the quality of the activities and the extent to which the event is promoted. As a result, considerable direct advertising of the event is required, supported by the County's public information efforts. This would require additional resources beyond current level funding. The County's Public Service & Information Department will be responsible for developing and implementing an aggressive marketing and publicity program funded by additional resources. It is contemplated that this event would be held during National County Government Week, which is in April.
- **Speakers' Bureau/Community Education** – The goal of this program is to average having at least one group each day receive information about Mecklenburg County. This can be accomplished by booking County leaders on radio and TV talk shows, speaking to PTAs or civic groups, or hosting special public meetings.

City/County On Call

In partnership with the City of Charlotte, this function offers one phone number that residents can call 24 hours a day to access recorded voice messages on numerous topics of City or County government. Callers also may dial a code to instantaneously receive faxes on numerous topics (news releases, list of City Council members, etc.). Additionally, On Call can be programmed to be proactive, thereby calling out recorded messages and sending broadcast faxes to targeted populations within the City and County.

Strategy 3: Internal Communications

Educating and informing Mecklenburg County employees about their organization's goals, achievements, failures and challenges is critical to employees understanding their role in the organization and how they can contribute to the organization's goals. Several means are used to keep employees informed.

EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS GOALS FOR FY2001

Plan and implement internal communications plan that meets or exceeds customer expectations, or constitutes exceptional performance, based on employee satisfaction levels described below:

Standards for meeting expectations

At least 50% of employees are satisfied with timeliness, accuracy, content appropriateness, and delivery method of receiving information.

Standards for exceeding expectations

At least 75% of employees are satisfied with timeliness, accuracy, content appropriateness, and delivery method of receiving information.

Standards for exceptional performance

At least 90% of employees are satisfied with timeliness, accuracy, content appropriateness, and delivery method of receiving information.

TACTICS FOR ACHIEVEING GOALS

Employee Newsmagazine

Mecklenburg County publishes a monthly newsletter distributed with paystubs to every County employee. The goal of **OUTLOOK** is to keep County employees informed of events and activities of County government and County employees. Enhancing employee knowledge and enhancing employee morale are key objectives in publishing **OUTLOOK**.

Training Videos

PS&I produces training videos for requesting County departments. These videos are used by the departments to train and educate County employees and clients.

NEW ITEM: Further consideration should be made to develop a systematic use of the training channel (see Training Channel below) internally for video presentations and live or taped employee forums with the County Manager and/or other trainers.

Equipment Training

PS&I offers training to employees, as needed, on the use of video equipment available for loan to employees, so they may have access to communications tools. Loaner equipment is available to qualified employees (those who have received training). PS&I has limited amount of equipment to loan. Additional promotion of this service would create a demand that exceeds supply capabilities.

Employee Committee Support

PS&I provides support to various employee committees such as the United Way Campaign Committee and the Arts & Science Council Campaign Committee. PS&I also coordinates an annual campaign for employee donation of books provided during the Christmas

holiday to underprivileged children and families.

E-Mail

PS&I coordinates distribution of messages to all County employees with access to e-mail as needed to alert employees to emerging issues or keep them informed of current organizational goals and activities.

Employee Hotline

PS&I operates a severe weather hotline with a recorded message. Employees can call 336-3636 to obtain the County's working hours. Every two weeks, coinciding with the regular meetings of the County Commission, PS&I records, on this same phone number, information pertinent to County government and employees. Promotion of this service will be accomplished via the **OUTLOOK** and e-mail.

Intranet

PS&I posts the **OUTLOOK** and other information on the County's Intranet, the County's internal web pages. As this function evolves, PS&I will place greater emphasis on posting information to the County's Intranet and promoting the service to employees.

Miscellaneous Strategies

1. Issues Management

PS&I director is a member of the County's Senior Leadership Team to provide input and consultation on communications and other issues. This access to senior level information and the organization's decision makers allows the County's information officer to be aware of emerging communications issues, offer timely and pertinent recommendations, and develop strategies and tactics to deal with these issues proactively, rather than reactively. In addition, PS&I should be consulted in a strategic mode to assist departments in developing communications & marketing plans that feature proactive functions. Such a proactive initiative can serve as a means to get messages to residents and to seek feedback from residents before issues become controversial. PS&I also will continue to work with departments and senior management in tactical communications as crises situations arise.

2. Emergency Public Information

PS&I serves the Charlotte-Mecklenburg All Hazards Plan by coordinating communications services in the event of a community emergency or disaster. Many times this is done in cooperation with the City of Charlotte and/or other government agencies' public information operations. This effort combines media relations, direct communications and internal communications.

MEASUREMENT

External Audiences

- **Annual Surveys**

As the cornerstone of its communications & marketing plan, PS&I will purchase questions on the UNCC Urban Institute's annual survey, repeating questions each year if necessary, for use in measuring the ongoing and annual success of the County's communications & marketing plan in reaching desired outcomes. Various projects also may

require the use of surveys or some other audience measurement tool to both assess pre-project opinions/customer satisfaction, and post project opinions/customer satisfaction. When resources allow, such measurement tools will be included in project communications plans.

Internal Audiences

- **Surveys**

PS&I uses surveys of County employees to assess employee satisfaction with internal communications, including OUTLOOK, e-mail, etc.

Those with questions about or suggestion for this plan should contact:

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