

8 Strategies for Effective Local Government Communication Planning

Best practices for satisfying the rising citizen demand for transparency and bidirectional dialogue

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Introduction

Good Communication Is Good Public Service

Good communication helps develop a bond of trust between a local government and its citizens. This trust inspires those citizens to get involved in their communities in a constructive manner. It also helps make local government programs and services more effective, as they're more likely to receive engagement and participation from the people they serve. The importance of effective communication between governments and the communities they serve became glaringly apparent when COVID-19 struck, providing an object lesson in how vital a well-defined communication strategy is in both times of crisis and during less fraught occasions. As one study found:

"Several countries have successfully reduced their COVID-19 infection rate early, while others have been overwhelmed. The reasons for the differences are complex, but response efficacy has in part depended on the speed and scale of governmental intervention and how communities have received, perceived, and acted on the information provided by governments and other agencies."¹

¹Hyland-Wood, B., Gardner, J., Leask, J. et al. "Toward effective government communication strategies in the era of COVID-19." *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 8, 30 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00701-w> 2

What applied in this study of federal-level communication also applies to communication at the local level. **Communities that benefited from well-designed government communication initiatives were more likely to take positive actions** such as wearing masks and receiving inoculations. When government failed at this and only provided poorly targeted, confusing, incomplete, or one-way messages that left no room for questions or dialogue, or were not available in a person's primary language, the public was more likely to fall prey to inaction or dangerous misinformation.²

However, good local government communication strategies are not only valuable during crises. They're cardinal in securing citizen compliance or cooperation on any number of fronts, from getting them to utilize available services to paying fees or simply gaining a real sense of community. They also engender greater trust between citizens and local government by presenting the latter as being transparent, responsible, focused on local needs, and proactive.

It's essential to bear in mind that "communication," as journalist and author Sydney J. Harris once noted, isn't about pushing out information. It's about "getting through" to citizens by making communication accessible, relevant, timely, and bidirectional.

²Sauer, Molly A, Shaun Truelove, Amelia K Gerste, and Rupali J Limaye. "A Failure to Communicate? How Public Messaging Has Strained the COVID-19 Response in the United States." Health security. U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2021. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9195491/>.

A Guide to Overcoming Obstacles

The prospect of devising and implementing an effective communications plan can seem daunting. Citizen engagement demands a more specific type of communication planning, yet developing best practices can be overwhelming when considering the multiple factors local governments must account for, such as:



1. Public Engagement



2. Local Government Service Access



3. Internal City Staff Efficiencies



4. Integrating New Technologies that Facilitate Civic Engagement

This is why Granicus set out to create a set of best practice guidelines for civic engagement communications planning so local governments can utilize a templated strategy that's been successful for other communities. These proven best practices will serve as a point of reference for local government leaders who want to optimize the communication experience for citizens and key stakeholders.

We'll explore eight key strategies for building an effective and evergreen local government communication plan that will:



1. Align your plan with the strategic priorities of local government leadership



2. Effectively communicate with the community at all times, even during challenges, crises, or other unforeseen events



3. Drive greater engagement, trust, and responsiveness among citizens

“The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.”

Sydney J. Harris, Journalist & Author



Strategy 1

Develop Vision, Mission, and Values Statements for Local Civic Engagement

The first step in the journey toward a well-crafted communications plan must begin with stating the **vision, mission, and values** that underpin every action and operation undertaken by local government.

Private sector organizations invest a great deal of time and resources in developing these statements. Why? Because they understand these statements drive real bottom-line value by clearly defining the points of difference that matter to their customers, which translates into sales and market share.

Similarly, a local government **vision statement** lays out what a community aims to achieve for itself and its citizens, while a **mission statement** explains the how-and-why that will realize that vision, and a **value statement** defines the principles and ethics that local government seeks to follow and honor.

The result? Citizens have a better understanding of the qualities that set their community apart and make it a good place to live and work and are inspired to become more participatory.

The Vision Statement

Note that a vision statement can be as lofty and ambitious as you choose to make it and with good reason. It's intended to set out a motivating and unifying goal for local government staff and stakeholders, and even citizens, supplying a basis for strategic direction and decision-making. Here, as an example, is the vision statement for the City of Dublin, Ohio.

A global city of choice. Vibrant. Innovative. Engaged.

The Mission Statement

Here's the City Mission Statement for Dublin. This serves as the broadest and top most public policy directive for the city, and speaks to the values and goals being pursued:

*We are and always have been a proud local democracy. In our service, we strive to provide the best quality of life and environment in which our residents and businesses can thrive. We seek to ally our proud traditions with the best innovations of the future.*³

The Values Statement

The core values of what a local government believes in may be embedded within the mission statement, but this is often articulated separately. In Dublin's case, they're stated to be:

Integrity, Respect, Communication, Teamwork, Accountability, Positive Attitude & Dedication to Service with the best innovations of the future.

³ "Community Plan, City of Dublin OH." Community Plan. Accessed November 27, 2022. <https://communityplan.dublinohiousa.gov/foundations/citys-mission-statement/>.

How Do You Develop These?

There's a solid set of best practices to follow in developing a new or updated set of vision, mission, and values statements:

First, ask yourself "why": Are you drafting these statements in order to promote community values? To motivate citizens, staffers, or both, and toward a specific end? To provide a template for future government planning? It's crucial to define this because future programs, content, and outlays will be based on these new statements, so the outcome they pursue should be solidly defined.

- ✓ **Get employees involved:** The more they feel they're represented within the final vision, mission, and values statements, the more likely public sector staffers are to work to support them. A study by the University of North Carolina found that **80% of employees who understood a local government's mission would be happy to spend the rest of their careers with that organization.**
- ✓ **Screen them with citizens:** While it doesn't make sense to put these statements up for a public referendum, it may be good to impanel citizens as part of a working group to review them at some point in the process.
- ✓ **Keep them short:** While there's no set limit on how long a vision or mission statement can run, common sense (and the limits of human memory) advise these should be short, impactful statements that will stick in mind with people.
- ✓ **Put them into everyday practice:** These statements shouldn't be drafted and then just consigned to a press release and a file drawer. They need to be embedded in every step of organizational operations, from recruitment ads to onboarding, from staff meetings to performance recognition and reviews. They have to be viewed as a very real and applicable set of guideposts for every action taken by everyone in government.

⁴"Four Tips for Mission and Values Statements in Local Government." icma.org. Accessed November 27, 2022. <https://icma.org/blog-posts/four-tips-mission-and-values-statements-local-government#:~:text=Four%20Tips%20for%20Mission%20and%20Values%20Statements%20in,your%20mission%20and%20values%20into%20organizational%20practice%20>.

Key Attributes of Vision/Mission Statements Among Top Global Cities

One study of a list of “Top 10 Liveable Cities” globally found seven commonalities in their vision and mission statements:

- ✓ **People were put first:** In their vision and mission statements, these cities had put citizens at the core of their vision statements, with strategic planning efforts centered on the lifestyle and living standards of citizens.
- ✓ **Diversity, equality, and inclusion:** DEI was a crux of their mission/vision statements, aiming to ensure all citizens share in the health and success of the community.
- ✓ **Health and well-being:** Progressive municipalities share a stated focus on ensuring equitable health and well-being for all citizens, delivering a healthier and happier overall community.
- ✓ **Strategic foresight and shaping the future:** Successful local governments plan for the future, not just for meeting immediate needs, or even need over the next few years or decade. They articulate a long-term vision that spans future generations.
- ✓ **Green economy, sustainability, and addressing climate change:** Cities ranking highest in the study were concerned with the decarbonization of public assets and operations, and with fostering sustainable growth and green economies.
- ✓ **Creating innovative, smart, digital communities:** These cities are focused on transitioning to being “smart” cities, leveraging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), big data, and more as part of their infrastructures.
- ✓ **Building a prosperous economy and broader recognition:** These governments aspire to contribute to local, regional, and even national economic growth, including maximization of economic potential and resilient financial management to secure wider recognition and influence outside their own borders.

The lesson here is to not shrink from ambitious goals when crafting a vision or mission statement as part of your local government communications plan. Such ambition can be a source of inspiration and focus for both government and the community.

Example Vision & Mission Statements

Hampton County, SC:

Vision:

As one of the most progressive, small counties in the state, Hampton County seeks to uphold its... Vibrant Economy... Rural Quality of Life... And Sense of Community Pride...

Mission:

The mission of Hampton County Government is to provide quality public services in a timely and competent manner, and to work with the cooperation of the community and other local government units to create a vibrant and healthy physical, social and economic environment. Services shall be provided in a fair, respectful, and professional manner consistent with available human, natural and economic resources.

Toronto, ON:

Vision:

Toronto's vision is four-pronged: Toronto is a caring city. Toronto is a clean, green, and sustainable city. Toronto is a dynamic city. Toronto invests in quality of life.

Mission:

To serve a great city and its people

Kansas City, MO:

Vision:

Our local government will be nationally known for its transformative efforts that make Kansas City the diverse and sustainable community of choice for people to live, work, and play as a result of its safety; vibrant neighborhoods; business, educational, and cultural opportunities; connectedness; and vitality.

Mission:

The mission of the City of Kansas City, Missouri is to deliver quality, customer-focused municipal services with an emphasis on public safety, neighborhood livability, job creation, responsible planning for economic growth, infrastructure improvements, transportation systems, public health, and the environment. In pursuit of this mission, we use data to make decisions and measure progress based on economic, social, and environmental factors.



Strategy 2

Build Brand Presence and Awareness

Though on face value it may seem that branding may not apply to local government, it's an outdated attitude to have. Public sector officials are increasingly adopting branding best practices to form a better relationship with the constituents that they serve.

What's driven this change in attitude? In an era of globalization, municipalities have found themselves **in competition as never before** for investment, resources, and population (especially skilled and professional labor). This has caused them to embrace many of the tenets of entrepreneurship, and branding and marketing are among the entrepreneurial tools they've adopted to drive home the message that their communities are attractive places to live, visit, or conduct business. There's also the fact that positive municipal branding and messaging can have an impact on the attitudes of existing citizens.

The ROI of Local Government Branding

By packaging your municipality carefully, with a focus on what perceptions and responses you want your branding and messaging to create among your targeted audience(s), you can differentiate yourself from "competing" communities.

A successful brand **helps you tell a very specific story** that makes it easier to capture investment and support by raising the positive perceptions of your community both externally and internally. While also burnishing the image of the local government that created such an effective brand in the first place.

Thus, it's important to craft a strong municipal brand, then develop and sustain brand presence, which promotes brand awareness. The latter two terms are often used interchangeably, but we'd submit that there's a significant distinction between them:

- ✓ **Brand presence:** literally means how “present” and visible your brand is in the channels where your audience spends its time.
- ✓ **Brand Awareness** is the degree to which your target audience is familiar with your brand and how well they recognize it. Cultivating brand presence drives brand awareness, yet you also need a strong brand in the first place to make this work.

Cultivating brand presence drives brand awareness, yet you also need a strong brand in the first place to make this work.

The Elements of Brand Building

- **Have clear goals in mind:** When you’re launching a new branding effort, you first need to decide what you’re out to achieve. Be as specific as you want. These objectives should be crystal clear so that any stakeholders or vendors who are part of this process know exactly what your are. The goals of a branding campaign can vary, from improving citizen perceptions to attracting external investments, but try to be as focused as possible in order to prevent the new branding platform from becoming muddled and compromised.
- **Define success:** Be sure to get key stakeholders aligned about what will constitute success for your branding campaign. This should include a discussion about what specific metrics will be used to measure performance.
- **Understand your current situation and existing perceptions:** It’s crucial to have an honest and forthright comprehension of what your community’s current situation is, what public (or even employee) perceptions already exist, and what obstacles may exist to creating positive perceptions. Catalog the positive and negative points of your existing community image so you can see what needs to be addressed in your branding.
- **Identify your target audience:** Prioritize the audience or audience segments you’re out to engage and conduct research within that target group to understand how they currently perceive your community, what messages would change those perceptions or motivate them to take a specific action (i.e., consider moving a business unit there)?

- **Test your branding and messaging:** Just as when an ad agency tests a good advertising campaign, municipalities should put the prospective brand and messaging in front of focus groups composed of target audiences to continually refine messaging and identify what resonates.
- **Set up metrics:** What measurements will you use to gauge success? These should be consistent and could include metrics like total brand impressions within your target audience, or brand sentiment tracking to see if perceptions have improved because of the campaign. ROI can be another metric, but bear in mind that the results of a branding campaign on behalf of a community will typically take much longer to appear. ROI could manifest itself in terms of total home sales over time, the number of business permit applications, and so on.
- **Mandate alignment:** Any new branding effort relies on compliance by everyone involved in the organization. From the organization website, presentations, agency letterhead, social media, and even what employees have on badges and workwear. Consistency is paramount. Every staff member needs to understand the need and be given the guidelines and resources necessary to understand and incorporate the new branding.

Visual Branding

“Visual branding” extends beyond just a logo. The graphic look and feel of all communications should be consistent, adhering to a set of rules that can be laid out in a master style guide or brand manual.

Brand manuals are key to defining the aesthetics of not just printed material but the user interface design (UI) and the elements of other digital experiences such as Customer Experience (CX), digital accessibility, and more.

For instance, no visitor to the [website](#) of the **City of Dublin, Ohio** is likely to confuse it with that of another town, thanks to the way it embraces a **logomark, imagery, and color palette** that embraces the heritage behind its name. In the case of a city like Dublin, that emphasis on consistent visual identity extends even to signage and construction guidelines.

Another example of visual branding excellence comes overseas from the **City of Melbourne, Australia**, a destination that too is known for tourism and adventure much like Hollywood, FL. The distinctive logo offers visual depth through eye-catching colors and gradients. The logo analysis from Ebaqdesign below demonstrates the functionality of the logo features.



“The Melbourne logo symbolizes a dynamic and progressive city that’s open to forward thinking.” (Ebaqesign) Powerful visual branding translates to brand identity and presence- which is why Melbournes logo is representative of the area and holds its own. This sort of idea relates to creating a brand manual, where there are specific guidelines to help maintain a municipal identity.

A **brand manual** should communicate everything involved in your branding initiative, from the guidelines for typography, photography, and logo usage to the logic behind the brand, even to the **audiences** that are being targeted. The very extensive brand guidelines for New York State supply a detailed example.

Brand Messaging, Persona, Voice, and Tone

It's not just what your brand looks like that will make it consistent and successful. Branding is also about the **specific messaging** you set forth, the voice and tone you utilize, and the brand persona you want to project to the world.

One way to draft that persona is to visualize it as an actual person, real or imagined. For instance, in the case of Granicus, we base our **voice and tone** on what we see in how Michelle Obama comports herself and communicates with others.


In the case of New York State, they're very precise about the tone of their brand voice and the persona it supports:

We are smart. Clever. Warm. We always speak with a bit of an edge.

We like to surprise you with our language. We love a good juxtaposition that makes you think differently about our beautiful state.

Like your favorite New Yorker, we enjoy our fair share of witty banter, yet we know exactly when to speak from the heart.

There are other ways to devise a persona; one exercise we've seen is, "if (_____) was a dog, what breed of dog would it be?" Another is to do a table that states what the brand is, and what it isn't. Here's a brief example:

Our brand is always	Our brand is never
 warm and friendly	 aloof and remote
 helpful and informative	 preachy and declamatory
 humble and unpretentious	 arrogant and full of itself

Another approach lies in how Modesto, CA drafted a set of seven “brand anchors” that represent the community and celebrate what makes Modesto unique, qualities that should be reflected in communications. A couple of these:

- **Community:** Modesto has an intense sense of community and pride. The fabric of our diverse community is woven together through concerts, parades, festivals, cultural celebrations, abounding volunteerism, and numerous places of worship.
- **Location:** Modesto is the heart of California. From Modesto’s central location, one can easily visit San Francisco, Yosemite, Lake Tahoe, or Santa Cruz in less than three-hour car drive. Modesto’s convenient location is also ideal for commerce transportation, distribution, and logistics, linking leading food and manufacturing companies to major markets.

Some Best Practices to Remember

When it comes to your brand look and feel, voice, tone, and persona, here are a few tips on how to manage them as you move forward:

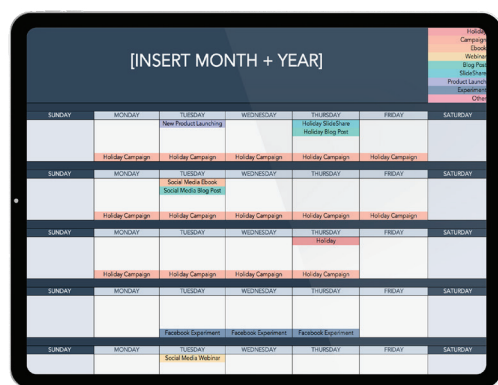
- **Don’t be static:** Your audience is going to evolve over time, either in makeup or in attitudes and expectations, so you should be regularly reviewing your branding to ensure it keeps pace with those changes and maintains its relevance.
- **Stay flexible:** You can’t afford to make your voice entirely monolithic because you’ll be using different platforms to communicate with different audiences. So, while you should maintain consistent guidelines, don’t get caught in a straitjacket: remember the need to adapt to different channels and contexts.
- **Leverage data for fine-tuning:** Use data to determine what’s relevant to your audience; if you learn your target audience is a group that’s made up of many Baby Boomers , Hispanic Americans, or households with young children, then adjust your voice, tone, and the messaging and content you’re putting in front of them accordingly.
- **Personalize:** Try to add a human touch to your communications to show they’re coming from real people and directed at (and getting responses from) real members of the community. Be sensitive to what different audiences may consider important or relevant. Plus, remember that the kind of communication that people find “relevant” on one platform, like Facebook, may not be considered relevant on Instagram or LinkedIn.

Driving Presence via Social Media Platforms

A cornerstone component of any modern marketing and communications strategy for local government must be its use of social media platforms. Extending your brand through social media offers tremendous opportunities if done correctly.

So, what are **the right steps to take** in capitalizing on that potential?

- **Identify your audience:** If you know who you want to engage via social media (as well as at your website or other digital touchpoints), you should then focus on learning which social media platforms they prefer to engage with. Remember that in most cases you're not dealing with a homogenous pool of constituents but with different audiences, each of them will have varying preferences when it comes to preferred social media content and channels.
- **Create content calendar:** Plan to support future public events, elections, road closures, construction, and so on. Make sure you have these indicated on your calendar months in advance and identify what channels and content formats you're going to be using for each of them. A content calendar not only helps you designate resources and set up content production timelines but delivers internal transparency for other stakeholders.



Take note of the free social calendar template on HubSpot referenced in the above image, the calendar allows for content planning, and a user doesn't need extensive social media expertise to utilize this intuitive platform. "Excel can be customized according to the priorities and metrics your team is focused on, so it's a great option for planning ahead." Though there are many social media content planning platforms available, free is always good.

- **Focus on the channels that will work:** There are a lot of social media platforms afoot, but not all of them – and possibly very few of them, depending on your situation – will really be viable for your needs. Again, let constituent preference play a part in vetting what channels you should use.
- **Customize content by channel:** Once you’ve defined which social media channels will work best for elevating brand presence and audience engagement, it’s time to develop messaging and content that’s most likely to succeed within each channel. Facebook, for instance, is a good forum for community discussions and virtual conferencing and is a favorite of Millennials. Twitter is useful for sending out timely updates or breaking news and alerts. Gen Z prefers TikTok, which means you’ll have to develop video-centric content to really connect with that audience.

Local Government Best Practice Social

The City of San Antonio uses Facebook to update citizens on Public Health, supplying a space for conversation in the comments while offering the caption in Spanish to help promote accessibility.

Key Components

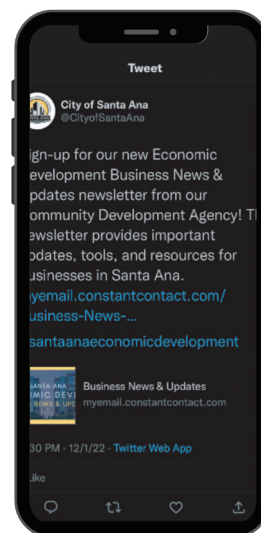
- ✓ Informative
- ✓ Call-to-action
- ✓ Supporting high-quality image



In this best practice local government social media example, **The City of Santa Ana** provides Economic Development news updates on Twitter. This type of update lends itself to Twitter, as the content is largely news-focused.

Key Components

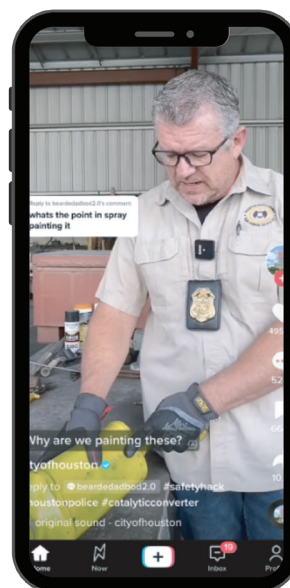
- ✓ News Update
- ✓ Call-to-action
- ✓ Short and sweet



The City of Houston, TX provides video-centric content on the newer platform, informing citizens on the interesting reason the city paints catalytic converters. The content is thought-provoking, easily consumable, and helps reach audiences like Gen-Z and Millennials.

Key Components

- ✓ Short and sweet
- ✓ Thought-provoking
- ✓ Video-centric



- **Assemble an assets library:** Build an inventory of approved images, videos, links, copy, and other content assets you can use in building future campaigns or to plug into gaps in your calendar when they arise.
- **Don't erase negative comments:** You may find you're getting a number of trollish responses within your social feeds, but don't hit DELETE on them. For legal reasons, you should preserve and monitor these responses, though you may make them hidden within the feed.
- **Acknowledge and manage negative responses:** You should let a complainant know they've been heard, and express empathy, but also know when to move that conversation offline or terminate it entirely.
- **Automate the process:** There are multiple tools available that remove the busywork of manually posting to feeds, and allow you to plan out weeks or months ahead of time. With social media listening tools, you can monitor what people say about your agency or organization outside of your own feeds. But whatever automated tools you use, have a social media curator or manager on hand who's actively supervising your social media presence.

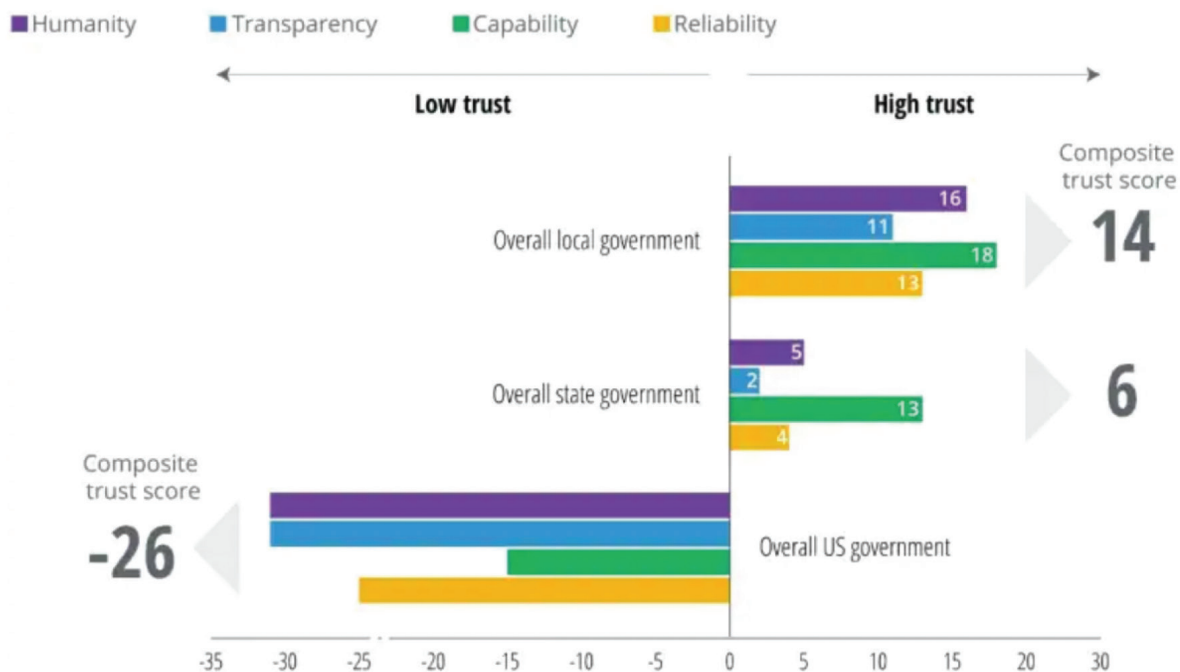
Curated and automated platforms like Hubspot Social Media Management Software can make planning social media posts easy and save time for local government officials. Plan ahead for the next couple of weeks, months, or years and stay on top of social media management instead of letting it become a burden.

Archive your social content: Don't depend on a social media channel to safely warehouse your posts and follower responses. You should regularly preserve these communications and conversations in a secure digital archive – again, there are tools that can automate this – as they can help in defending against legal action or reputational attacks. Plus, they're part of the public record and should be available if record requests are received.

Branding + Technology = Trust

What's the ultimate goal of all this effort? **To build greater trust between local government and citizens**, exactly as commercial brands strive to build trust with consumers. Trust between Americans and the government has reached a crisis point, a looming "trust deficit" that's been measured in many recent polls and studies. On the plus side, local and state governments are viewed as being more trustworthy than the federal government:

Local governments are the most trusted among the surveyed respondents



Note: The score for overall US government is based on the Deloitte federal trust survey conducted in November 2020 and taken from William D. Eggers et al., *Rebuilding trust in government: Four signals that can help improve citizen trust and engagement*, Deloitte Insights, March 9, 2021.

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Restoring or maintaining trust is as much about driving positive experiences and perceptions among citizens as it is about a government's ability to deliver services, as Deloitte explains:

“Rebuilding trust in government depends as much on the perceptions of citizens as the capabilities of government. That is to say that governments must work both to increase perceptions of its trustworthiness as well as the organizational capabilities to actually deliver services, products, and experiences worthy of trust.”⁶

Deloitte offers us a key finding about how a citizen's digital experience of local government engagement affects their trust level. In their research, it was shown that people who are pleased with a state government's digital services rated the state government highly in trust metrics. If they were displeased, that level of trust was negatively affected.

⁶Eggers, William D., Bruce Chew, Joshua Knight, RJ Krawiec, and Mahesh Kelkar. “Rebuilding Trust in Government.” Deloitte Insights. Deloitte, October 22, 2021. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/building-trust-in-government.html>



Strategy 3

Identify Citizen Stakeholders and Audiences

As we've mentioned previously, identifying your "stakeholders" – for local government, these are going to be its citizens – and constituent audiences are key to successful communication campaigns.

By doing this, you'll drive effective messaging and enable your communications team to create bidirectional engagement, two-way conversations where you'll be able to provide opportunities for constructive feedback, not to mention insights into the emotional temperature and notable concerns of citizens.

Identifying Your Audiences

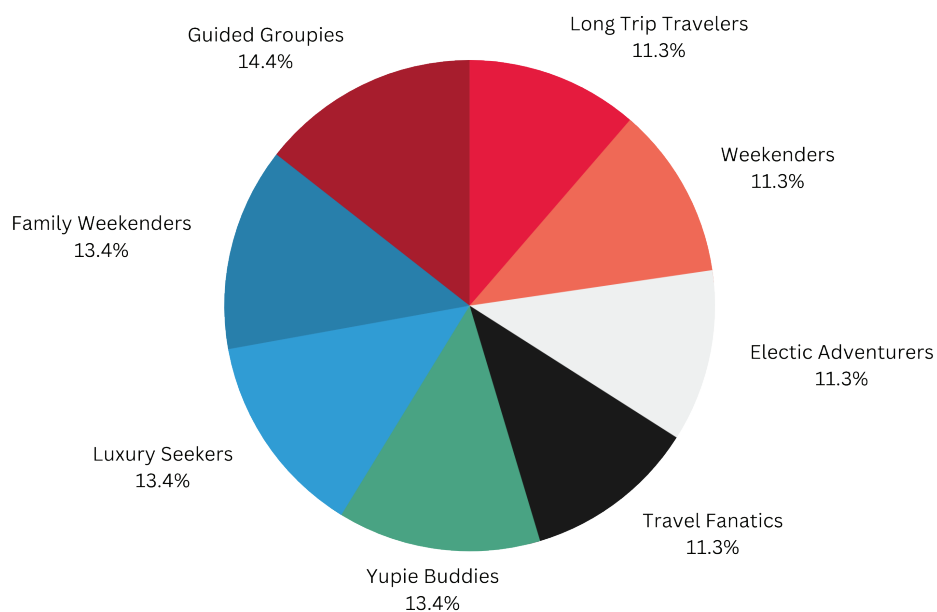
There are different avenues for identifying and learning more about your citizen segments:

- **Mine existing datasets:** One of the first and most obvious ways of identifying the audiences you may need to address is by analyzing existing data, such as census data, prior community surveys, or other demographic and ethnographic research.
- **Employ a civic engagement platform** such as a CRM designed specifically for government to capture and track interactions between local government and constituents; this will supply immediate and real-time insights into who they are and their concerns, actions, and behaviors.
- **Conduct regular digital polls and surveys** to learn more about the makeup of your community and its concerns. These can often be micro-polls or micro-surveys that are quick and easy for citizens to engage with; by conducting them regularly, you're demonstrating your interest in feedback and transparency.

- **Consult experts and academia:** Meet on a regular basis with other community analysis experts at the county or state level to learn more about your citizen base, as well as with school district and collegiate leaders to get their take.
- **Set up external advisory groups:** Initiate general or issue-specific community advisory groups to provide feedback and insight about how certain segments, or the citizenry as a whole, regard certain issues or initiatives. These groups can be formal and long-term or can be pro-tem outreach meant to get immediate perspectives and input about issues or matters that pop up over the short term.

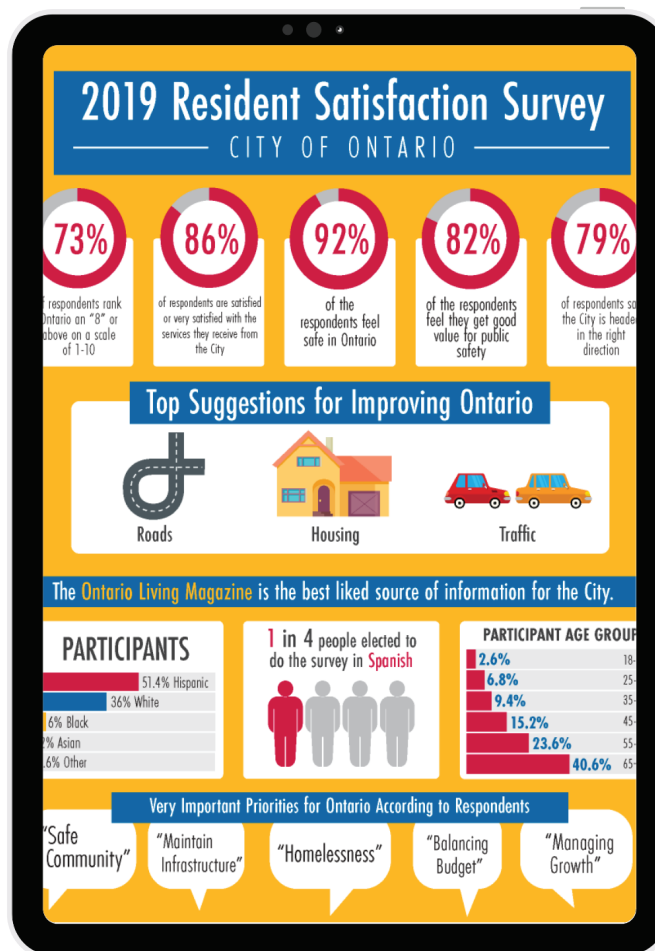
With the insights you glean from this groundwork, you can construct a **citizen segmentation model** to visualize the various segments in your local population, and align the proper branding and outreach strategies against them.

Example: To support the promotion of tourism in New York State, the communications team employed psychographic and behavioral segmentation to identify the different audiences they sought to target with their advertising and marketing, and assigned a persona to each.



Share What You Discover!

To further communication and transparency with the community, data and the insights culled from that data can be shared with citizens in any number of ways. The survey infographic shown below was posted by the City of Ontario, CA, to its website, but other municipalities have used demographic and sociographic data to power real-time dashboards citizens can access 24/7, or include these visualizations in emails and newsletters.





Strategy 4

Provide Transparent and Timely Two-Way Communication

We've stressed the importance of two-way communication between local government and citizens elsewhere in this document, but it's so central to the success of any community communication initiative that it deserves a deeper examination.

There are two essential categories of communication that ought to be included in any overall strategy: passive and active communications. In either category, bidirectionality should be built into their implementation.

- **Passive communication** consists of those “must-do” tactics that are necessary to have a presence, but don't demand interaction from an audience; these include websites offering common government content, brochures, business cards, advertising, signage, branding, and others.
- **Active communication** consists of tactics that aim to compel your target audience's conscious engagement and can include phone centers, chatbots, live events, interactive digital tactics such as polls and gamified media and microsites, CRM, and more.

In recent years, the increasing focus on public participation has caused **a shift from passive feedback to active engagement** and consultation with citizens using a new range of digital tools. Citizens can be enlisted to provide input at the early, conceptual, and planning stages of government programs, making these programs more relevant and effective when they reach launch.

Whether a communication tactic is passive or active, it should have bidirectional communication and audience-specific engagement built into it, all of which serve to make local government more **accessible and transparent** for everyone in the community. A website, for instance, should give citizens the opportunity to provide feedback and offer multilingual options for users.

Be Quick in Communicating

When deploying two-way communication tactics, it's crucial to have them provide timely and accurate responses to citizen engagements. People are now thoroughly conditioned to immediate responses from consumer apps and platforms and expect the same of private sector digital interactions.

Moreover, immediate and accurate communication can be a matter of grave consequence, especially during a crisis.

TIP: Use your digital engagement touchpoints as an opportunity to explain government functions or complex matters in straight forward, easily consumable ways.

Centralize Engagement

One key to effective communication is centralization; forcing citizens to search for the needed information or for channels to ask questions or provide feedback is a hurdle to engagement. By leveraging a digital engagement platform designed around the realities of local government, you can centralize necessary interactions and make it far simpler for citizens to enjoy timely two-way communication

Deploy a centralized engagement & information hub: With a digital engagement platform that's device-agnostic (such as OneView), you can deploy a single, easy-to-access hub for all citizen interactions, including submitting and tracking service requests, sending and receiving messages, accessing FAQ resources and other information, and updating them on events and programs.

Make it mobile: Many citizens may have limited access to laptops or desktop computers, and even those who do use those devices prefer mobile access (particularly if they're in younger demographics – though not exclusively!). So it's mandatory that you deliver robust, mobile app solutions.

APP FACT: In 2020, Gen Zers and Millennials spent 16% and 18% more time on apps than the previous year, respectively. One surprise? Among Gen Xers and Baby Boomers, the increase was 30%.

Case Studies in Better Communication

San Antonio, TX

Many governments now provide both live- and on-demand meeting video webcasts, but the citizens of San Antonio, TX needed advanced accessibility. Nearly 42% of its residents speak Spanish at home; of those, almost 30% are not fluent in English. With over 70 public meetings per year, the City wanted to make sure these citizens were given the opportunity to engage with their local government.

Using Swagit's EASE™ encoders and streaming services, the City now broadcasts its live video feed for government meetings **in two simultaneous streams**. Each stream uses the same HD video. However, the primary stream includes the meeting's live audio feed as well as closed captioning in English, and the secondary stream replaces the broadcast audio with a live Spanish voiceover translation. On-demand Spanish-language meeting videos are paired with meeting agendas in Spanish as well. In addition, residents can search captions for keywords spoken during the meeting.

The results

In June 2018, the City of San Antonio received its seventh All-America City Award from the National Civic League for the City's work in promoting equity through inclusive civic engagement.

Santa Ana, CA

The government of Santa Ana, CA, saw the need for providing its diverse community with access to public meetings, including 77% of the population that speaks primarily Spanish. Other issues they wanted to resolve? Long, tedious "Agenda Publication Days" frequently kept staff working past midnight. And a manual process to provide multilingual access meant juggling five different systems to publish an agenda.⁷

By implementing the OneMeeting meeting management suite, Santa Ana was able to make the process infinitely more efficient, freeing up staff time to connect further with diverse populations in their community.

The results

Meeting agendas are now available in 100+ languages with minimal IT support. Spanish translators assist with live interpretations during meetings, and residents can listen to meeting recordings in their choice of English or Spanish. The long nights spent on Agenda Publication Days are now long gone, and the staff can work regular hours again. IT involvement is no longer necessary, and staff can access the full system on any modern browser, from anywhere, removing the need to be in the office to collaborate.

Remote meetings increased the number of public meeting attendees, since citizens can access them from any device, including cell phones. Plus, they can now provide feedback digitally via comments on agenda items and even request to speak remotely, further improving citizen engagement.

⁷Rep. The State of Mobile 2021. Data.ai, 2021. <https://www.data.ai/en/go/state-of-mobile-2021/>.



Strategy 5

Determine Content Focus

In developing a communications plan, it's not enough to simply commit to communication and accessibility. It's vital to understand what information and content are important to your citizens, so you can focus on developing and delivering that content expeditiously and efficiently.

So how can you determine what information is going to be of the greatest value and interest to your community? How many citizens truly care about library hours, 311 requests, and the date of this year's Founders Festival? Here are approaches you can take to uncover their actual points of interest:

- **Audit past information requests:** What are, historically speaking, the topics and issues that have seen the most interest from citizens?
- **Staff experience:** While it may be “anecdotal,” front-line staffers who have dealt with citizen inquiries will have insights into what information is most sought after.
- **Survey citizens:** Reach out to them to get their direct feedback on what content and information is most valuable to them.
- **Utilize existing research:** There have been comprehensive studies of what citizens desire in terms of digital access to specific services and content, such as the What Citizens Want 2022 study, which details the preferences among different age and demographic groups.
- **Leverage website analytics:** By tracing visitor behaviors, you can get insights into what interests them the most, particularly if you've been tracking downloads and searches.

⁷Rep. What Citizens Want 2022. Rock Solid Technologies , 2022.
<https://www.rocksolid.com/digital-civic-engagement-what-citizens-want-2022>.

Interest in using mobile jumped by as much as 20%, in some cases, despite a flattening penetration rate for mobile devices. COVID may have driven this, along with the fact that people are attuned to the convenience and quick responses of mobile apps in nearly every other corner of life.

What are some of the **types of content** associated with local government services that are typically being sought by citizens? Those include city council meeting agendas and recordings, event information, library and public facilities hours, 311 requests, status updates on services, records requests, and so on.

Remember, too, that citizen interest is only one (albeit important) guidepost for deciding the content and messages local government should distribute. There will be **matters of public welfare** that will demand immediate focus, some of them continual and others arising unexpectedly. COVID-19 was the most obvious recent example of the latter, and it gives us an example of how one community revamped content delivery for its citizens.

Case Study: How Dublin, Oh, Centralized Content Engagement During COVID

Dublin, OH is an excellent example of adapting digital communication platforms to successfully deliver important messages and provide a unified touchpoint for vital content and communication, whether during a crisis like the pandemic or as an ongoing facet of local government access. **The city carefully analyzed how its citizens were consuming information,** both on their phones and in their homes, and adopted an omnichannel strategy to not just inform, but connect.

That meant using channels like mobile, social media, and even Alexa to help manage COVID-19 for this city of approximately 42,000. According to Lindsay Weisenauer, Public Affairs Officer for the City of Dublin, “we regularly update our website, Alexa Skill (a daily news brief for Alexa devices), and social media accounts including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Nextdoor, and Instagram,” she explained.

She added how they had “also added a ‘CORONAVIRUS’ button to our GoDublin app,” a mobile app that now could provide a single portal for citizens to access pandemic-related information, request services, view video updates and the latest news and updates on closures and cancellations, and submit questions or concerns. The app is now being integrated across all of the city’s operations, post-COVID.

The results

Citizens have, said Lindsay, “have responded positively and engagement is strong on all platforms.” For an in-depth account of this implementation, see the webinar.



Strategy 6

Communication Program Execution

Once a communications team has prioritized what content is most important to citizens and community welfare, it's time to develop your execution plan.

One method is to draft a **comprehensive communication plan and calendar** that incorporates all relevant information about a program (or even about all planned programs) into a central, cloud-based project management resource. This will serve multiple purposes, such as:

- A **"single source of truth"** about all communication and engagement initiatives, available to assigned stakeholders. This will eliminate silos that cause issues when officials can't access pertinent data because another department has that data sequestered on paper or in their own systems.
- A **task management matrix** identifying the components of each project and assigning roles and responsibilities, deadlines, etc.
- A **segmentation map** showing which audiences will be receiving specific content and message types, and how.
- A **media plan** detailing which channels and platforms will be used for each respective program, and who they will target.

Consolidating all communication initiatives in such a unified calendar or management tool provides top-down visibility for local government leaders and communications leads. It also makes it easier to manage multiple initiatives and channels.

In addition, a written abstract of the communications plan should be posted for public consumption, like this example from the **City of Auburn, ME**.

TIP: Deadlines and accountabilities must be baked into any execution path, with scheduled or automated reminders and escalations to ensure participants carry out their parts.

Execution Best Practices

Other proven practices to observe as you enjoy successful execution?

- **Hold a kickoff meeting and in-progress team meetings:** Senior leadership should be present at the execution launch to emphasize the importance of the program and to stress the benefits the team will be delivering to the community. Regular in-progress update meetings will air out issues and challenges and help the team reach collaborative solutions.
- **Measure performance along the way:** Don't wait until the program has concluded to analyze results, but regularly check metrics to assess what's working and what isn't in order to make informed adjustments.
- **Make content evergreen:** Once a content asset has been published, that doesn't automatically mean it's reached the end of its useful life. Many "evergreen" content assets can be updated and re-published at future dates; holiday-themed content, for instance, that will be relevant for years to come.

- **Build templates** for content and communications assets and even entire programs, incorporating proven best practices into each template. That way, those assets won't have to be re-created completely from scratch if a similar need arises later on.

For example: An event communication template would include all the assets needed to execute a specific type of event, including shell versions of emails, handouts, banners, web pages, and so on.

- **Create task management templates** that detail the various steps and tasks involved in the execution of a certain type of program, including tips, resources, and contacts.

For example: a template advisable to keep on hand, and regularly updated? A **crisis communication plan** for managing emergencies and natural disasters.

TIP: More local government communications teams are assigning project tasks using a “trading floor” model, where duties are based upon skills, interests, and initiative rather than a person’s position or title

Strategy 7

Defining Success Metrics

Performance management of any campaign, whether in business or government, relies on performance measurement. Since citizen taxpayers are more vocal about how their money is being spent by local governments, the efficiency and effectiveness of individual programs must be quantified for evaluation and to drive improvement of future performance.

First, set realistic (if ambitious) and clear goals for your communications initiative.

This can follow a classic “three levels” model:

1. **Outcome goals:** What are the overall final objectives you want to reach at the program/campaign conclusion? In this case, the outcome goal might be to promote and attract citizen funding for a new public recreation center.
2. **Performance goals:** What do you have to do to achieve your outcome goals? In this case, you might aim at capturing 1,000 citizen donations.
3. **Process goals:** These are very specific “what-to-do” workflow goals to help hit performance goals. In our example, one of your many process goals might be to publish a new web page about the funding program.

Whatever success metrics you choose to employ should tie back to the goals that have been set. For the example above, you might want to capture a certain number of citizen hand-raisers, so click-through rates (CTRs) and conversion rates will be germane.

What are some of the key performance indicators (KPIs) a communications team needs to consider in putting together a success metrics model for a program, or for the overall municipal communications ecosystem?

- **Citizen Satisfaction Rates:** As seen under Strategy 5, you can actively survey citizens to determine how satisfied they are with the level and quality of municipal communications, or with a particular communication program.
- **Request Response Time:** One KPI we can apply to two-way communication performance is how quickly a citizen request for information or a service sees a response, even if just an acknowledgment and not a final resolution.
- **Social Media Subscribers/Followers:** Knowing the number of people subscribing and following your social media feeds gives you insight into the number of engaged residents, and may even provide deeper insights about their interests and segmentation.
- **Town Hall/City Council Attendees:** This gives you an idea of the level of citizen engagement with local government meetings and with policymaking processes.
- **Municipal Mobile App Users:** The number of downloads and usage levels your mobile app enjoys are an indicator of A) how aware citizens are of the app, and B) its effectiveness, the information you can apply in making updates.
- **Municipal Website User/ Visitor Tracking:** The number of citizens visiting your website and how they browse it is good metrics to establish site performance. This also can apply to the citizen-facing information dashboards you provide.
- **Services Engagement Metrics:** Extracting performance metrics from data sources like 311 engagement data (see below) can allow managers to track and improve service performance.
- **Click-through and Conversion Rates:** Whether for email programs, newsletters, or online advertising and promotion, CTRs and CR are the prevailing performance metrics used to measure the success of programs where you want to direct citizens to take certain actions.

Case Study: Cupertino Uses Data to Improve Transparency and Efficiency

The City of Cupertino, CA was looking for a way to be more transparent with its residents and staff within its 311 operations as part of a city-wide focus on data. From PCI to Tree Services, says Andy Badal, Asset Management Technician at the City of Cupertino, “we have dashboards for everything.”

But 311 services could not provide the same level of transparency. In the prior system, resident visibility into the status of projects was limited, and customer service suffered and did not integrate with Cityworks, which was a huge execution and visibility pain point, among others. Cupertino **needed a data-focused solution** that would connect seamlessly with their Cityworks asset management system while also improving visibility and customer service for residents.

By implementing Granicus offerings including OneView and Knowledge Base, integrations and APIs now allow **important 311 engagement data** to flow out of the CRM and into data visualization applications like Microsoft Power BI. These dashboards share 311 data with residents on a publicly available web page to promote transparency. Meanwhile, department leaders and staff use an internal 311 dashboard to track, measure and improve service delivery.

Since its launch in March 2020, Cupertino’s 311 Request Overview dashboard has made request data available to the public directly from the city’s website. The response has been positive, claims Teri Gerhardt, GIS Division Manager. “The public really seems to love having that dashboard on the site.”

The results

In this data-driven city, a data-driven platform adds visibility and efficiency to 311 and service requests, leading to improved service delivery and exceeding the expectations of staff, city leaders, and residents.



Strategy 8

Empower and Train City Staff in Roles and Processes

At the heart of any project or department are the people who are putting a plan of any kind into practice. That holds true for a communications department, too. So how can technology and processes combine to better support the people who are central to success?

Giving them that support is mission-critical for local governments, as more of them face a **retention crisis** that shows no sign of abating. A recent report on state and local government workforces found that it may be accelerating:

- 53% of state and local government employees are accelerating their retirement plans, while 41% of respondents said the largest wave of retirements is coming in the next few years.
- 67% of local governments see turnover as an important priority in 2022, up from 44% in 2021.¹⁰

Compensation was one of the key reasons for people leaving government workforces, but another factor that comes in play in nearly any employer-employee relationship is the matter of recognition and training:

- 78% of employees said being recognized motivates them in their job.
- 69% say they would work harder if they felt their efforts were better recognized.¹¹
- Only 30% of government employers said they had any training and development program that went beyond a one-week initial onboarding and orientation.¹²

¹¹Officevibe Content. "Statistics on the Importance of Employee Feedback." Officevibe, October 24, 2022. <https://officevibe.com/blog/infographic-employee-feedback>.

¹²Rep. State and Local Workforce 2022. Mission Square Research Institute, 2022. https://slge.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/06/2022workforce.pdf?utm_content=CTAButton&mkt_tok=MTgyLUV

Yet these employees are expected to carry out work that's often tedious and repetitive, resulting in frustration and attrition. Not to mention how, with proper training and up-to-date processes and technologies, they could be deployed against more productive and beneficial work.

What's the lesson here for communication teams hoping to carry out ambitious programs that stand to benefit their communities? That information-sharing, training in the particulars of a program, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and the adoption of better technologies and best practices can go a long way toward keeping staffers engaged, positive, and productive.

Improve internal communication around programs:

- During the pre-launch phase of a communications program, hold a meeting for all involved staff where goals, roles, and accountabilities are clearly laid out.
- Use a designated collaboration tool such as Slack where members of the team can stay in constant touch.
- Spotlight top performers or exceptional contributions regularly throughout the course of the program.

Support people with the right processes and tools:

- Hold process reviews to see how existing processes can be optimized or replaced, if necessary.
- Train teams in lean process /continual improvement methodologies.
- Be sure to provide in-depth orientation around the new program to foster understanding and problem-solving.

Adopt tools to improve workflows and staff capabilities:

- Implement workflow automation to accelerate processes and remove drudgework.
- Leverage tools like a government-specific Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) platform, and train staffers on how to use it.
- With any new technology, hold an implementation meeting to familiarize teams with the tool and get IT alignment.

As we've discussed, communication tools and processes are vital for **any local governments success**. Throughout the 8 communication planning strategies covered, we illustrated how **government tools and processes** enhance communication for reasons like building trust, fostering two-way communication, creating a centralized engagement hub for citizens to communicate with city staff, etc. The opportunities for communication success are **limitless** as we continue to advance and invent innovative tools and processes to make communicating easier, more efficient, and have the greatest impact on the greatest number of people. With the help of local government thought leaders committed to excellence in communication and serving citizens, Granicus is here to help support and partner with municipalities to provide government solutions that help local governments make more **informed decisions, connect with residents, and build stronger communities**.

About Us

Granicus is the global leader in government technology and services partnering with more than 6,000 government organizations and serving 300 million people, helping transform the way government services the public and their constituents. With comprehensive cloud-based solutions for communications, government website design, meeting and agenda management software, records management, and digital services, Granicus empowers stronger relationships between government and residents across the U.S., U.K., Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. By simplifying interactions with residents, while disseminating critical information, Granicus brings governments closer to the people they serve—driving meaningful change for communities around the globe.