

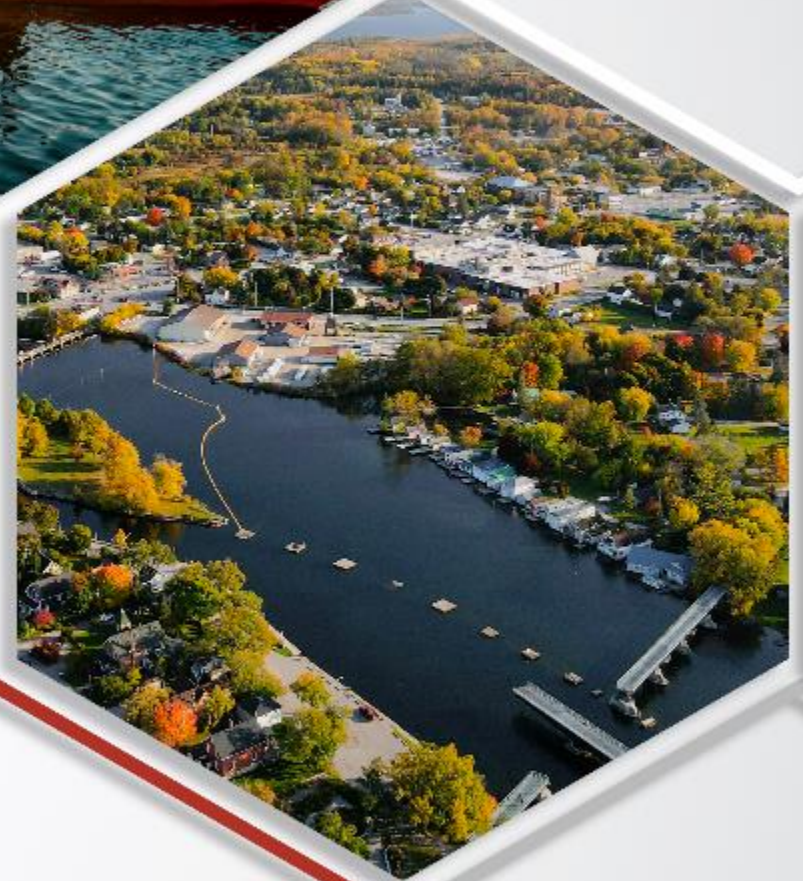


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COMMUNICATIONS

City of Kawartha Lakes Communications Strategy Refresh: Research & Recommendations Report

October 2023 - updated

Andrea Montgomery, APR, Prosci, Vice President



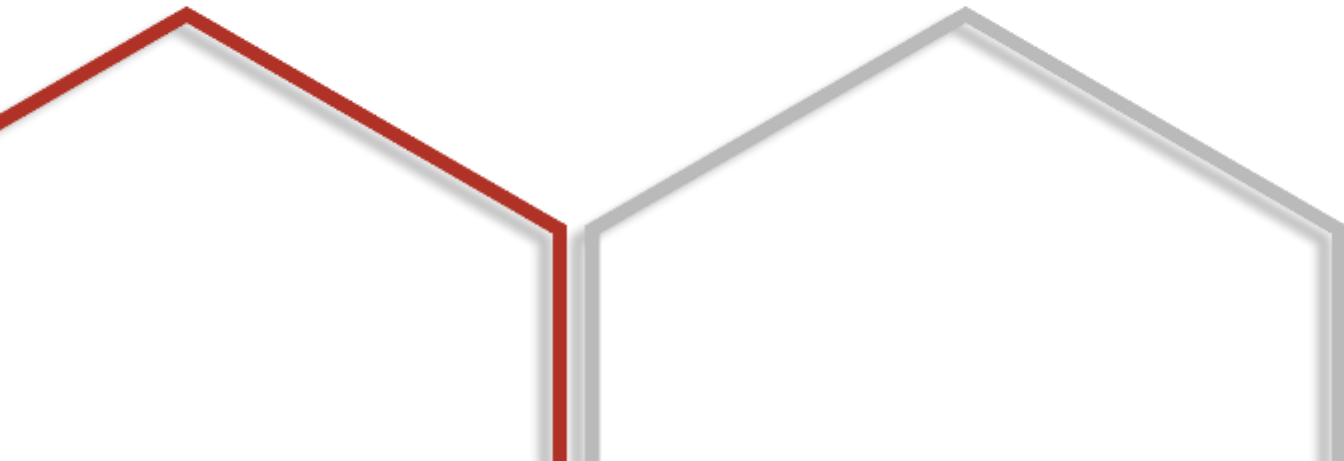
Methodology

Redbrick and City led

- ✓ Review of materials provided by the City
- ✓ Meeting with CAO
- ✓ Individual meetings with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor
- ✓ Interviews with: the communications team, four managers, regional editor of MyKawartha.com
- ✓ Communications and Customer Service survey: 304 responses
- ✓ Six Quick Poll questions, ranging from 25 to 102 responses
- ✓ Two focus group sessions (seniors and business community)
- ✓ Input from the Deputy Mayor's Did You Know initiative
- ✓ Input from several recent conversations with comparable municipalities
- ✓ Best practices from dozens of in-depth interviews with municipal communications leads over the past few years
- ✓ Redbrick's 20-years' experience working in and with the municipal sector
- ✓ Sector trends and research



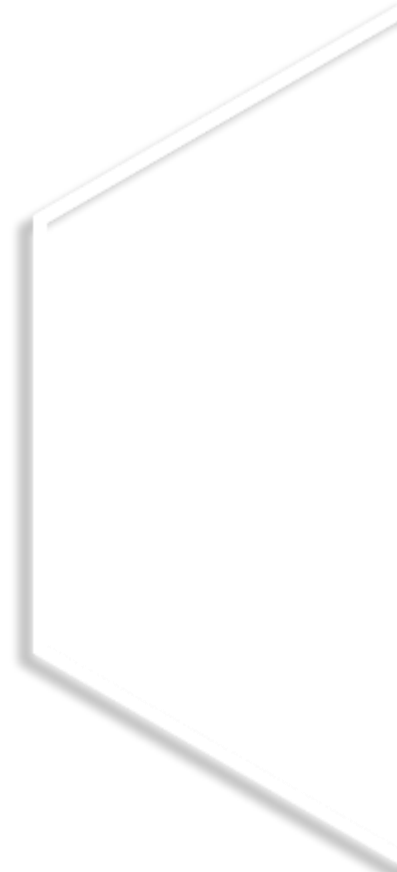
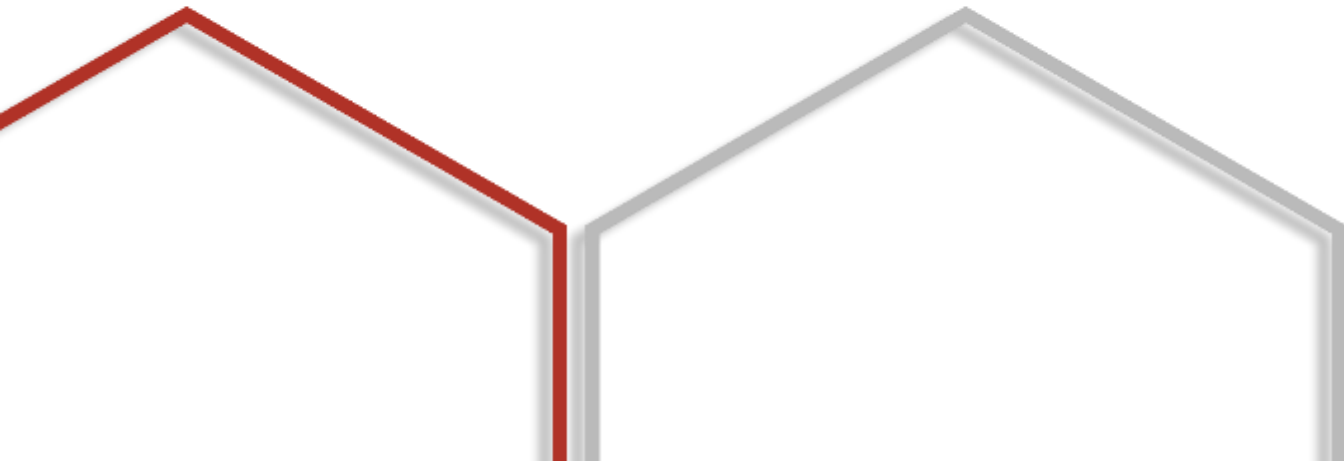
Staff Interviews



High level key themes

- Communications function has evolved and strengthened; more professional
- Looking for stronger role clarity, approvals/decision making, collaboration
- Broad and diverse audience to reach (concern about overreliance on social media)
- Need to share more positive, proactive and engaging and human stories on multiple channels
- Media relations seen as important to continue to foster and leverage – how to pivot to address lack of print news
- Stronger internal communications would be valued
- Need to prepare the community for growth
- Strengthen partnerships with other groups – more voices
- Strengthen use of data to inform decisions

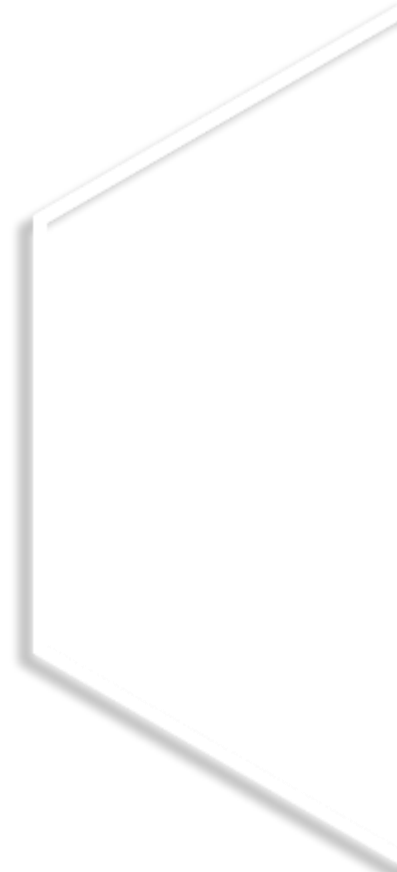
Mayor and Deputy Mayor Interviews



High Level Key Themes

- Communications has improved, good online coverage; spread thin
- Want a more proactive and innovative approach – show everyday value and progress; tell story of economic development and growth
- Opportunities to increase multi-channel communications with greater visibility
- Challenging to engage and inform all residents
- Wish for a better story of what makes you strong as one city
- Leverage influencers and champions (e.g., volunteer firefighters)
- Engage and inform Council; help them communicate

Community High Level Key Themes



Key Themes

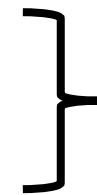
- Word of mouth is strong
- Local paper is a strong communication tool, including online media coverage
- Website is passive tool and used mainly to find information or events
- Want more online services, but some still use the phone
- Overall good satisfaction rates
- Desire for more timely information – permits, roads, updates
- Service call backs not consistent – tie in with customer experience
- Make it easier to know who to contact
- Use Facebook and Instagram the most
- Groups appreciate the visibility of and engagement with the City
- Provide layers of information – liked *Did You Know* (successful, evergreen content)

Comparable Municipalities



Recent comparator municipalities (interviewed)

- York Region
- Pickering
- East Gwillimbury
- Milton
- Calgary, Alberta
- Wentzville, Missouri
- Guelph
- Mississauga (former communications director)

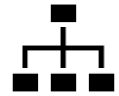
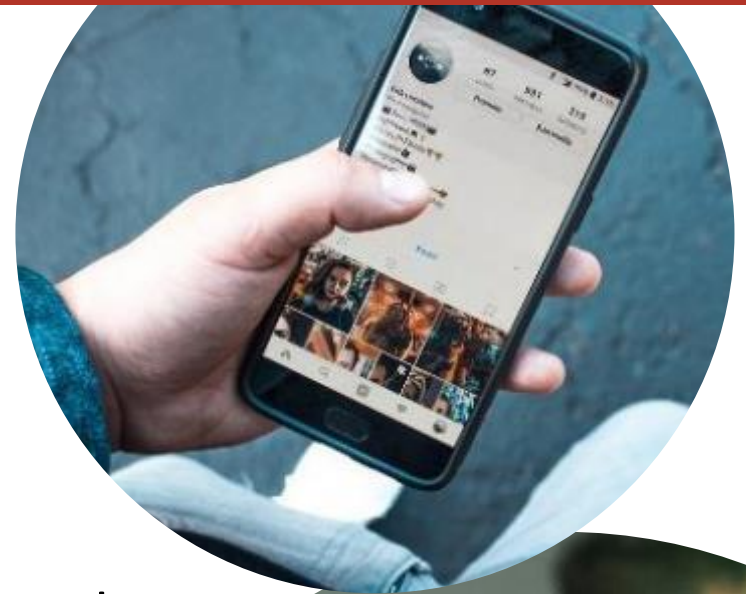


Discussion focused on
corporate strategy
development

High-functioning municipal communications teams

- ✓ Focus on strategy first and connection to business goals, then tactics
- ✓ Have a seat at a senior most table and are sought out for strategic advice
- ✓ Highly visible and collaborative with regular and intentional connections with department teams
- ✓ Have clear and understood processes and planning / measurement tools
- ✓ Function like a newsroom
- ✓ Audience focused tools and tactics
- ✓ Have own budget
- ✓ Embody a growth mindset

Top areas of investment or focus



1. Increasing team capacity



2. Digital storytelling, transformation, measurement



3. Public engagement



4. Customer service alignment



5. Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
communications/positioning



Guelph and Mississauga: Top 3

1. Leadership support is critical.
2. Build in readiness to adapt to changing circumstances.
3. Include a strong focus on measurement and continuous improvement.



Tips: Guelph / Mississauga Strategy Development

- Know how you talk about the City to tell better stories
- Have leadership be engaged at each step of development to help them be more invested and help ensure communications is essential to the process
 - Ultimately want leadership to tell others to use Communications
- Circle back to community organizations you engaged – provide a preview of the strategy
- Lots of work to rollout to teams and demonstrate how they are part of the plan – put them in it
- Report back publicly every year – push for more outcomes
- Ensure foundational frameworks are in place: media relations, communications engagement etc.
- Brought in outside communications expert to establish with leadership the imperative of effective communications to help make the function expected at the table (Guelph)
- Growth mindset on the team – ongoing professional development, investment in the team; coaching on optimal performance and making them strong practitioners and business leaders

Comparator municipalities – key findings

Municipalities functioning like a “newsroom”

- Tell a concrete, simple story for best results
- Changes in local news in many municipalities
- Changes in media consumption (digital-first, looking for “news” outside of traditional sources)
- Increasingly, municipalities are telling the story from start to finish
- Organic content has more reach than paid advertising
- “Stories” include easy to share content, images, links to more info, posted in multiple locations

Comparator municipalities – key findings

Tools vary by audience, no magic bullet to reach everyone

- Must be audience centric
- Seniors often targeted separately from others (but don't assume that seniors won't engage online)
- Range of engagement platforms (dedicated online engagement platform, virtual meetings, in-person meetings, community engagement events, e.g., Burlington)
- Traditional advertising still popular, where possible, but some question its value vs. organic content
- Social media – different messaging / creative content for different platforms
- Social media – templates to help departments create their own content when needed and more time sensitive (e.g., water main breaks overnight)
- Internal tools include emails, newsletters, Town Hall meetings, staff recognition

Comparator municipalities – key findings

Be more visible and bring more voices into the fold (*combatting misinformation/negativity, and becoming more inclusive*)

- Grow influential groups
- Increase the associations on which the municipality participates
- Find the voices of those not on digital
- Meet the moderators of community groups if appropriate and productive
- Develop stronger operational listening – be deliberate (ala Jim McNamara)

Comparator municipalities – key findings

Good policies and tools create a strong foundation

- Have strong policies to support communications – media relations, social media
- Communications toolkit comes in handy, with timelines (contract)

Customer service connection

- Teams are creating stronger ties with customer service teams, in some cases they are in the same division
- Two-way sharing of information for early issues identification, consistency of messaging, strengthening content

Issues management

- Proactive approach with pre-approved messaging and processes for common issues
- Standard briefing note template that includes key messaging

Comparator municipalities – key findings

Looking ahead

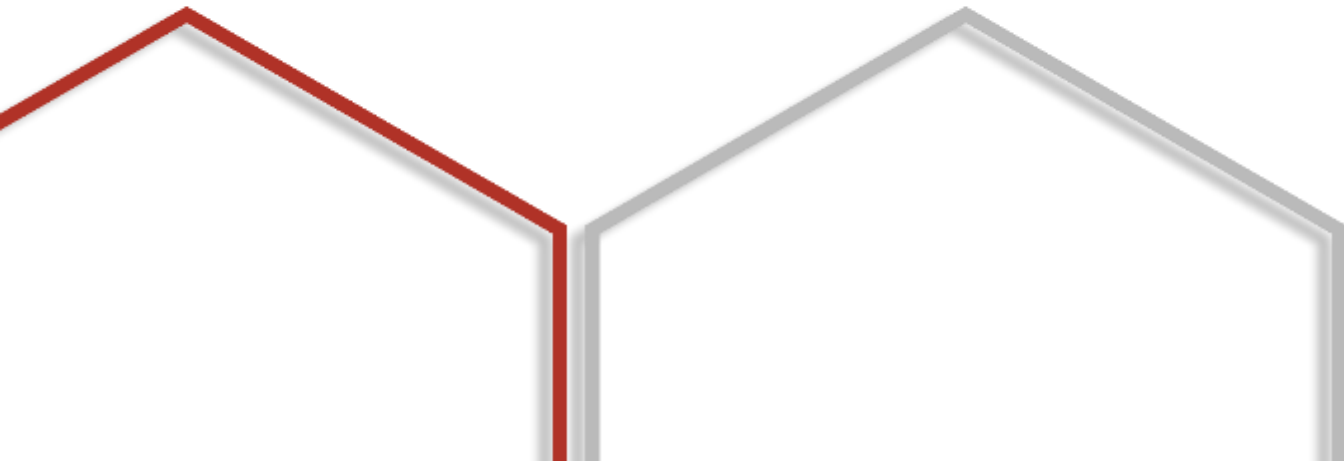
- Trust building and relationship management: managing misinformation and disinformation, naysayers
- Reaching audiences where they live – subscription based – get emails, and maybe phone numbers for texting
- Addressing the digital divide
- Partnering with community and media organizations
- Positioning the organization's EDI principles, actions

Sample Communications/Public Engagement Staff Complements

| Municipality | Population | No. of Comms Staff | Public Engagement staff |
|----------------|------------|--|--|
| Kingston* | 180,000 | 15 full time | 1 manager and 6 communications officers who are IAP2 trained who advise and support engagement; many staff across the organization are also IAP2 trained |
| Guelph | 150,000 | 11 full-time + recruiting one contract | 1 manager, 2 engagement coordinators; hoping to hire another specialist in 2024 |
| Whitby | 150,000 | 7 full time | No dedicated resources |
| Milton | 142,000 | 7 full-time plus 1 contract | No dedicated resources |
| St. Catharines | 133,113 | 7 full-time | Communications officers do engagement strategies; departments lead the engagement Communications create online project pages and consult with staff on tactics/provide feedback on surveys and do promotions and supporting graphics Have future plans to have a dedicated engagement specialist (depends on budget) Manager is taking IAP2 training and partnering with DEI manager to better reach marginalized communities/those not usually engaged |
| Pickering | 105,000 | 4 full time, plus 1 part-time for web | No dedicated resources; recently launched <i>Let's Talk Pickering</i> ; communications supports, but Planning leads most |
| Waterloo* | 104,896 | 8 full-time | Did not receive a response |
| Brantford* | 98,000 | 8 full-time plus 1 part-time | Brantford engagement process Similar to St. Catharines, with the exception of areas like Planning who are trained and do lots of engagement as per legislation. Communications will also help facilitate public meetings with SMEs. Council has recently struck a new Public Consultations Task Force, one mandate will be to update the City's Community Involvement Framework" which is 10 years old |
| Newmarket* | 91,000 | 7 full-time plus 1 contract | Communications works with departments and the digital specialist |
| Caledon | 82,000 | 7 full time | No dedicated resources |
| Kawartha Lakes | 75,000 | 3 full time | No dedicated resources |

Added:
Burlington (pop. 198,000) has 3 dedicated public engagement staff. They have won recent awards.

Sector Trends and Best Practice



“The modern Corporate Communications function is agile, multidisciplinary, and insights-driven.”

“Expectations around social issues have shifted the agenda — and there is no turning back.”

[2023 The Future of Corporate Communications Study: Edelman](#)

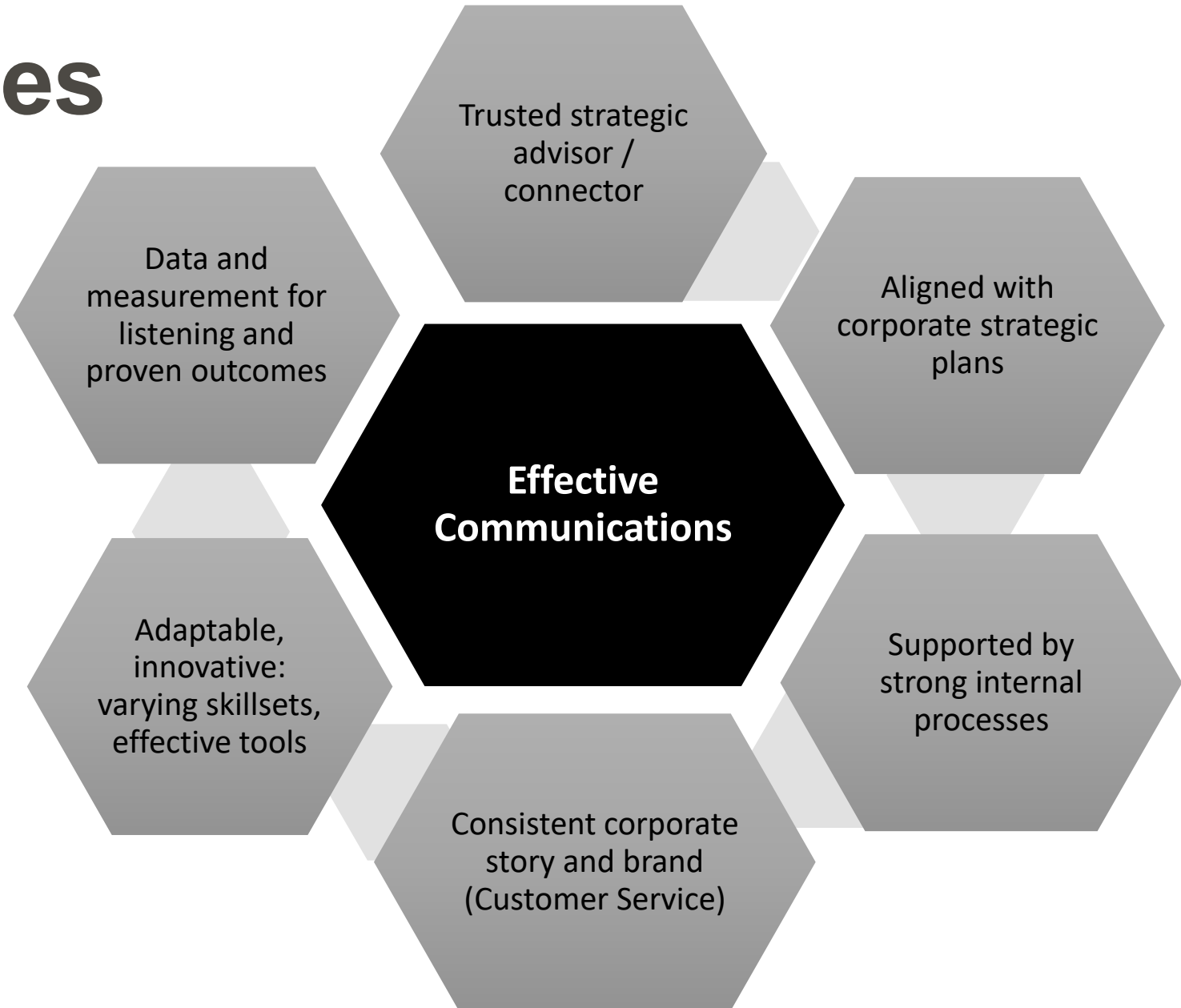
“The Chief Communication Officer provides ‘horizontality’ to strategy development, much like the CEO. Other C-suite members have a vertical perspective.”

– Dr. Terry Flynn, Director Master of Communications Management, McMaster University

Edelman: *The Future of Corporate Communications*

- COVID increased strategic role of communications
- Communications needs to be multidisciplinary; adding stronger business acumen (value creation), integration and collaboration
- Need a focus on professional development – learning the science, beyond the art; change management; finance etc.
- Use of technology is growing – with more blurred lines between marketing and communications
- Employee engagement is critical for business success
- Social purpose is more critical than ever
- Strong governance, process and accountability matter
- Demonstrate ROI to business goals – how making an impact
- TRUST: consistent demonstration of the brand being brought to life
- Be a partner with leadership

Best practices



Communications Landscape



Shrinking attention spans



Real-time access to information
and increasing expectations



Audiences creating their
own content

Megatrends in public relations



Higher stakes and rising
value of reputation



Empowered
audiences



Content shock and
disinformation



Many speak,
few listen



Decline of
journalism



A gap in wealth
and trust



AI comes to PR

What that means for communications leaders

Focus on relationships and
community building

Play a central role to define and
demonstrate the organization's
character, values and purpose at
senior table

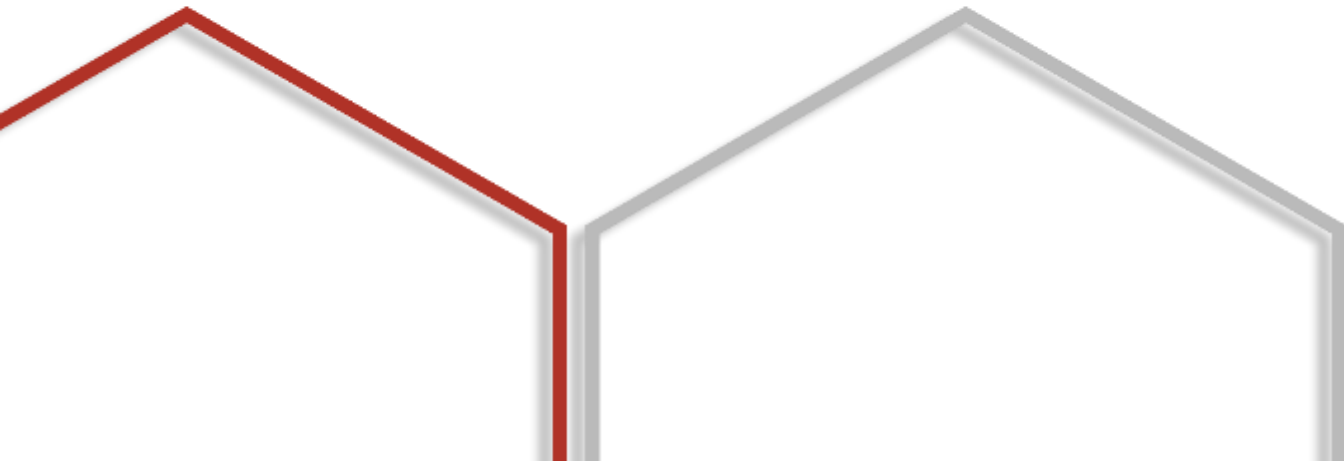
Earn trust through
inclusive listening

Leverage data on publics,
attitudes and behaviours

Align communication
planning with strategy
and purpose

Become organizational
storytellers

Analysis



Internal Strengths

- Role, function and structure of communications has improved over the years and has become more strategic and professional.
- The first communications strategy laid a strong foundation.
- City's voice is more consistent.
- Communications manager sits at the more senior table. The team collaborates well together and maps out annual projects and provides a toolkit for departments.
- There is commitment and work underway to improve internal communications.
- Good stability this term of council with a sense of “stay the course”.
- When Communications brought in early and can be proactive, there is recognition of demonstrated and stronger outcomes and impacts (e.g., downtown construction).
- Good tracking of workload and accomplishments to report back (time allocation and refresh of annual objectives).
- Using Media Valet as a great photo library and sharing tool.

Internal Challenges

- Demands on communications continue to increase. There is a greater need for a more proactive approach, with greater understanding of communications' value and function across the organization.
- Current capacity may not be able to keep up with increasing demands (doing well with the resources available).
- Roles and responsibilities, processes, along with the understanding of the decision-making process, need to be clarified and require greater collaboration.
- Internal communications has long been recognized as a gap to ensure greater consistency and engagement of staff. It will take time and commitment.
- The need to enhance technology and online tools, with the appropriate skillsets in place, is growing.
- Want to invest more time in and sharing of data and intelligence to drive decisions.

External Opportunities

- The City has many positive stories to tell to demonstrate progress and value for taxpayer dollars and to work more closely with local media.
- The City's brand is strong and online tools are well used, with engagement numbers increasing over time on Jump In Kawartha Lakes – can continue to build on this success.
- Organized community groups exist that have interest in what the City is doing and could be leveraged to share information and broaden reach (e.g., business community, lake associations).
- There is a willingness to try new approaches to be more effective and increase audience reach.
- There is opportunity to tell a stronger story about growth, expansion and a stronger economy.
- Recent “Did you know” campaign was overall successful and appreciated and content can be reused.

External Threats

- Word of mouth, which is out of the control of the City, is cited as a main channel of information for the community.
- The City has a wide variety and geographic span of audiences to reach. It can be challenging to reach them all effectively and results in some disparity.
- Each community is unique and have different needs and expectations.
- Audience expectations have increased. They expect timely information and opportunities to be engaged.
- Audiences are more empowered than ever to share their voice and opinions. There is also an increase in the spread of mis- and disinformation that can impact reputational trust. The need is greater for organizations to actively monitor and listen, and have systems in place to communicate quickly.
- New technology and tools, such as AI, are evolving rapidly. Communications teams need to have the ability to monitor trends and to be nimble to adjust to changing landscapes, and skillsets, and in some cases, drive organizational policy. Finding content on the website is sometimes challenging.
- Local media is sparse and Metroland print papers have been discontinued making it harder to reach all audiences.

Recommendations for the Strategy



Communications Excellence

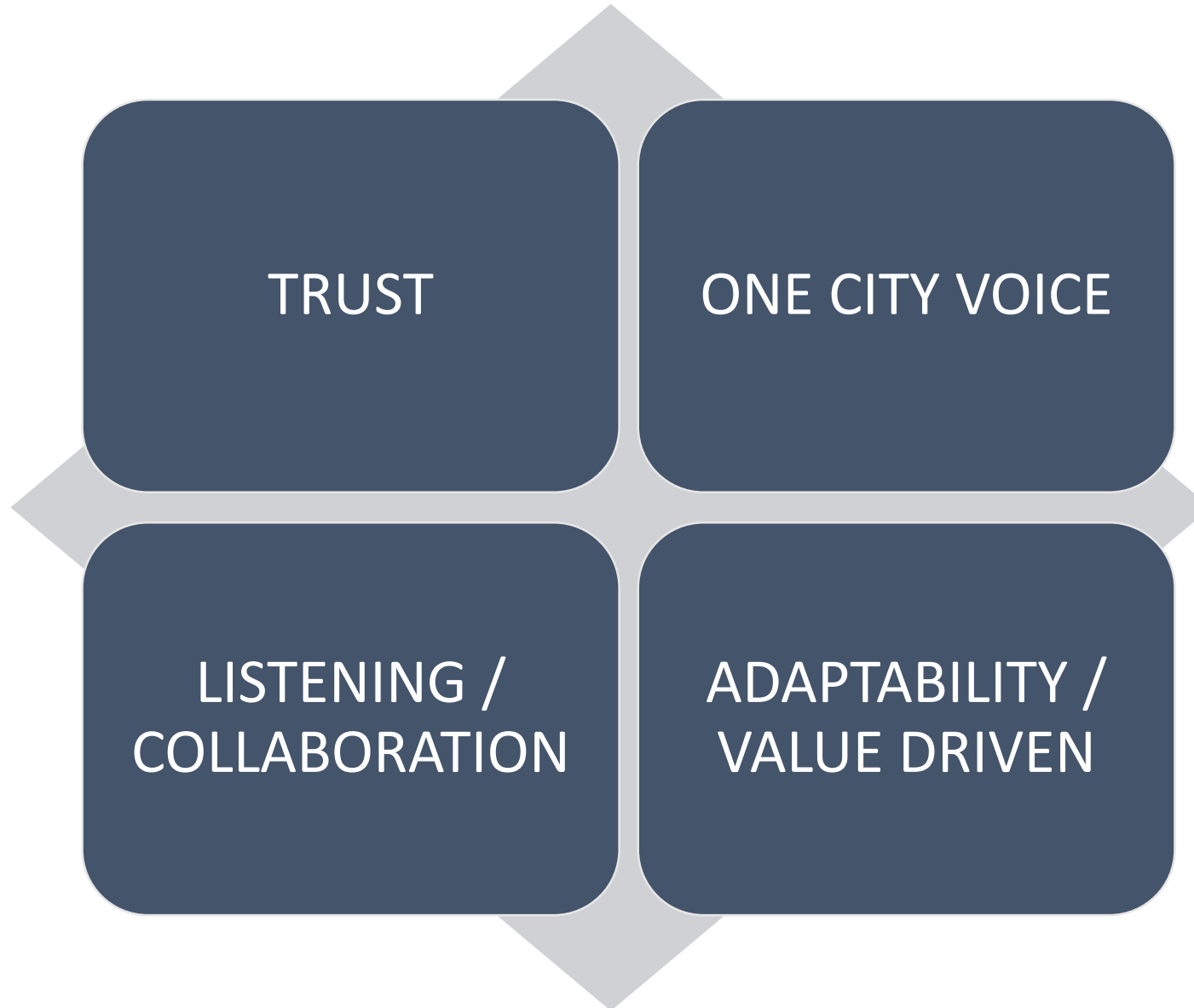
*...using communications to **manage relationships** with diverse stakeholders/audiences to:*

- *achieve mutual understanding*
- *realize organizational goals*
- *serve the public interest.*

Canadian Public Relations Society

www.cprs.ca

Driving principles/goals



Build on strengths

Inside Out

- Communications tied to vision, corporate priorities / KPIs
- Stronger communications mindset and role of staff
- Clarify value, scope of role, decision making processes / agreements
- Ongoing skills development
- Partnership with Customer Service
- Improve measurement/ evaluation

Proactive, quick and layered storytelling

- Ongoing human stories and behind the scenes
- How taxes spent and municipal accomplishments
- Media access to subject experts and proactive pitching
- Strengthen community connection to Kawartha Lakes
- Build in flexibility of messaging and channels by audience; quick hits to more detail
- Proactive issues/crisis management
- Ready for EDI positioning

Invest in listening

- Strengthen understanding of audience needs and perceptions (research, intelligence gathering)
- Strengthened and strategic engagement
- Stronger connections

Strategy recommendations: Internal

- All work should be aligned with Council and corporate priorities and business plans
- Internal communications focus: clear vision and goals to achieve, along with roles and responsibilities, inclusive workplace
- Include how you will build a stronger communications mindset and competency: road show; strengthened, positive collaboration and connections; education; onboarding training; easy processes to share updates with Communications
- Visibility with and support to Council: share messaging, make it easy
- Stronger understanding of roles, responsibilities and value of communications.
 - Review current barriers to communications efficiencies with departments and work collaboratively to find solutions
 - Consider RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) or Service Level Agreements
- Strengthened partnership with Customer Service in recognition of the alignment. Ensure intentional connection and working together – could leverage them to respond to daily social media questions as appropriate

Strategy recommendations: Internal

- Consider increasing capacity. Demands are increasing, especially for internal communications, public engagement, building trust and reputational risk, and for municipalities to create and distribute their own news. Current resources are stretched thin and should be assessed based on organizational goals and priorities.
- Ongoing and visible evaluation and reporting. The team needs to demonstrate their success as aligned with business goals; show proof of impact; share data and ensure they tell their story in a way that resonates with leaders.
- Communications initiates strategy first – look at goals then determines tactics
- Professional development plan for the team: e.g., APR/IABC designations, engagement (IAP2), municipal finance/performance measurement, change communications
- Recognition of changing sector and technology; drive organizational guidelines for AI
- Collaboration and project management tools (Google docs, Monday.com – Milton)
- Strengthened issues management framework, process, early warning systems, roles, templates, preapproved messages

Strategy recommendations: External

- Continue telling more human stories and showing staff at work, creating authenticity and connection
- Engage with media outside of releases and pitches to keep them informed, provide background information and context for stronger and more accurate story telling and ensure the City frames stories by resident impact/benefit (human side)
- Focus on strengthening community engagement corporately:
 - Determine what the corporation's commitment is/will be for the community
 - Develop a corporate framework / toolkit for staff to enhance strategic engagement planning
 - Ensure a multi-channel engagement – greater City visibility
 - Seek to engage a diversity of voices: go where people are, offer fun opportunities to engage, beyond digital
 - Always close the loop
 - Determine who needs IAP2 training
- Consider and embed EDI: vision, positioning, training (e.g., pre-approved Days of Recognition and approach) and readiness to respond to potential issues that tend to arise fast and are complicated/challenging

Strategy recommendations: External

- Ensure the team is ready to respond to EDI issues that may arise, which often come up quickly, are highly sensitive and challenging, and demand quick response
- Invite in more voices: Community Advocate/Ambassador group (e.g., Wentzville, Missouri)
- Targeted storytelling and channels: seniors vs. youth, neighbourhoods (e.g., NextDoor – Wentzville)
- Stronger and more consistent construction, roadwork stories – consider a toolkit for staff to ensure consistency and regular community updates/photos, online map of projects
- Celebrate uniqueness of every community as part of Kawartha’s story and strength – greater sense of pride
- More “quick and dirty” messaging that leads to further detail: most important take aways – increase ability to communicate quickly and provide layered information



“Everything you do or say is public relations.”

-unknown

Thank you

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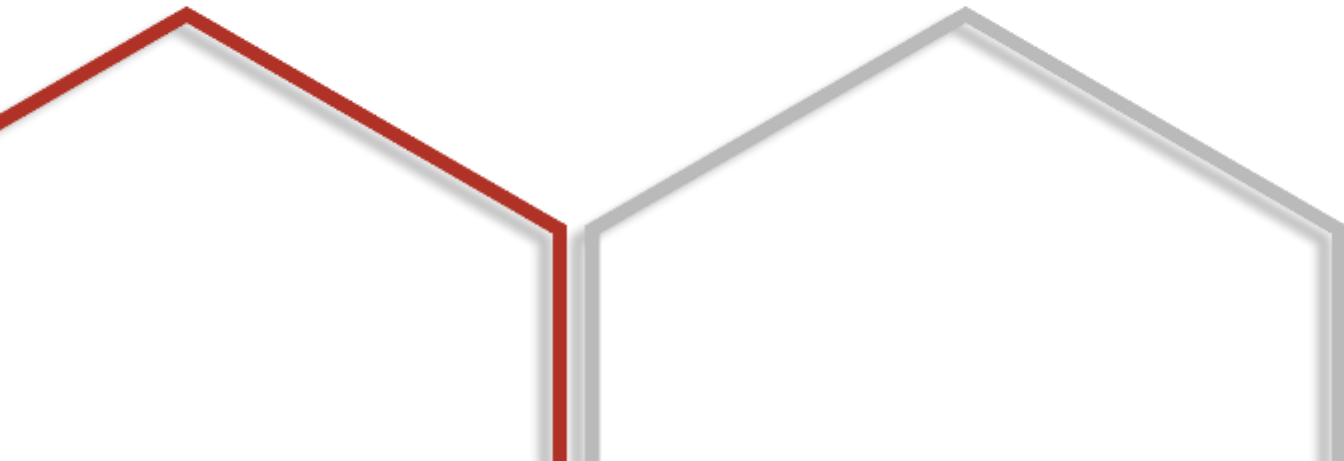
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Appendix

Detailed Comments



Staff detailed comments

- Communications has evolved over the past several years and has a strong foundation.
- The City's branding is strong.
- Audiences are diverse and there is a broad geographic area to reach. Youth are especially challenging to reach and engage.
- There is a desire for better coordination, proactive and innovative / engaging communications.
- More collaboration between communications and departments would help, including opportunities to break down internal silos.
- Engagement levels and community perceptions of their local government vary. Some citizens are highly engaged – often topic specific or based on needs of their community - some are frustrated with decisions, level of service. Staff want to improve overall public engagement.
- The City needs to be able to adapt to growth, changing demographics, community needs, tools; who you want to be while still honouring your communities.
- All staff want to share more positive, proactive stories, and build a stronger community and sense of local pride, including sharing human stories of staff too.

Staff Detailed comments cont'd

- Continue to build the relationship with the media with timely content, pitching, access to Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) for complex files; stories of how decisions affect residents – put a face to what's happening and what it means
- CAM is seen as important, professional. There is recognition they are stretched thin. (“small but mighty”)
- Some struggle with balancing department subject expertise with editing / recommended approaches from CAM. There is a desire for stronger clarity of roles and expectations, accountability, process and understanding of the difference between marketing and communications.
- There is a sense that seasonal residents want to be engaged and informed and the City should investigate these opportunities.
- The discontinuation of the Metroland print papers and limited City media coverage creates challenges related to reach and telling the City story. There is desire for more engaging content (less formal, more fun – appropriate to different audiences) using a variety of tools to ensure there isn't an overreliance on social media as the main communication tool.

Staff Detailed comments cont'd

- The website needs improvement to make it easier to find information.
- It is good that a plan is in place to improve internal communication and help ensure employees are well informed about City initiatives; getting the information first; build trust and confidence.
- It is important that the City prepare residents for growth and change.
- Consider opportunities to strengthen partnerships with community groups to support a more informed community, sharing accurate information.
- Communications should be driven by data to inform decision making and approaches, and to better understand the needs of different demographics.
- Most staff interviewed are aware of core City channels, but not all are engaged with them (esp. social media).
- Distribute layers of communication – quick hit, then ways residents can go deeper if desired; offer more video content, especially for youth.
- Leverage staff as SMEs to build trust and be visible; e.g., share behind the scenes content.
- Develop more alignment and collaboration with customer service, taking a more proactive approach, support social responding etc.; focus on the customer experience
- The City is challenged to address anger and misinformation on social media.

Council Detailed Comments

- Desire for stronger, more proactive and innovative two-way communication with the community; delivering messages and actively listening to resident feedback; want to be ahead of the game
- Concern the City relies too heavily on social media for communication.
- Media coverage is limited. City needs more visibility and see us investing in the City.
- A significant portion of the community are seniors and may not be tech-savvy. Need to leverage many channels for all age groups
- There continues to be a struggle to engage and inform residents (e.g., election numbers).
- Different areas in Kawartha have distinct identities. Want to tell a better story of what makes us strong – all communities are KL
- Audiences, like volunteer firefighters, could be engaged more and provide important contributions – they are prominent in their communities
- Some members of Council are still learning; working to building cohesiveness; and ensuring Council is told first

Council detailed comments cont'd

- CAM recognized as doing a good job with many demands: doing well with the resources they have and what they can do; positive changes and more established benchmarks over the years
- Online coverage is strong – social media and Jump In
- Want to get more of Council's messages out, especially on new issues (idea for councillor newsletters twice a year – one side per Ward, available in local stores)
- Biggest criticism is roads and potholes – need to tell the story of how we address this
- Need to tell the story of development and how we are managing it and still looking after existing residents; big opportunity for Ec Dev – more communications around it; become a welcoming community as we become more diverse
- Put some focus on seasonal residents who also pay taxes; as well as reaching younger people
- Want a better way to get messages out for issues, problematic situations (e.g., wind/snow); our ability to communicate quickly
- Need good mechanism for staffing updates – who council should call
- Better internal communications so staff are informed

Corporate Strategy Development: Context

Guelph and Mississauga

Guelph ([One City One Voice 2022-2026](#))

- Update from 2010 plan (originally pitched sooner)
- Includes public engagement (not part of original vision)
- Shortly after the election: no Council involvement

Mississauga (2012 10-yr Master Plan and 2018 four-year strategy)

- Most actions complete by 2018
- Aligned strategy with term of council, with their input
- Decide at year 3 whether to refresh or a new strategy
- Struggled with process and governance – where they fit in the organization
- No employee communications (retooled and trained someone)

Guelph and Mississauga

Developing corporate communications strategies

- Wrote down assumptions first and talked about what wanted to change based on business priorities – know what you want to change
- The strategy should be aligned with and support the municipality's strategic plan where possible.
- Focus is on communications excellence.
- Leadership play an important role. Their support and buy in is critical to success. Senior champions are needed.
- A plan helps establish communications KPIs and ensure regular reporting – show your data.
- All departments should be engaged in rolling out the plan. Education of communication's role, critical (“one person at a time”).
- There should be alignment between Customer Service and communications .
- Plans guided the allocation of resources and investments in communications.
- Helps create a work plan, priorities, KPIs, roles and responsibilities – who controls what.

Guelph and Mississauga

- Scope of the strategy was sometimes challenging to manage – expectations, scope creep from other departments.
- Internal communications a common challenge – should be a priority.
- Council engagement was important to success and understanding.
- Strategy should be rooted in industry best practice (no debate) and community analytics to know how to effectively reach audiences and the tone and principles they want/expect.
- Close loop with those you engage – invite them back – send an early high-level draft (small focus group?).
- Assign someone to be the project manager and have visibility with Council, give them something they want.
- Get budgets from departments for large projects – keep connections, invited to communications meetings.
- Use practical and plain language.
- Naysayers got “quieter” when there was a plan to point to.