



OTTAWA COUNTY COMMUNICATION PLAN

Introduction

In recent years, the Board of Commissioners has identified the need for a comprehensive communication plan during the yearly review and update of the Board Strategic Plan. In order to address this need, one of the four goals of the Board of Commissioners is “to maintain and enhance communication with citizens, employees and other stakeholders”.

In the 2009 business plan, six objectives are identified to accomplish this goal:

1. Develop and implement a comprehensive legislative action plan to communicate with legislators.
2. Develop and implement a comprehensive communication plan to communicate with the public.
3. Continue to develop and implement methods of communicating with employee groups.
4. Continue to improve communication with Commissioners.
5. Identify and appoint the best applicants to boards and commissions.
6. Strengthen role in state, regional and national professional organizations.

While this communication plan fulfills the direct objective of completing a comprehensive plan, it also serves as a guide to direct the overall communication strategy of the County. Like every plan, it will need constant attention and updates as circumstances change. Certain principles are provided at the outset of the plan to guide the overall development and direction of the plan. The plan is organized in three core areas; communication with citizens, employees and other stakeholders. Specific strategies are listed in each area, with deliverable action items identified to track progress.

It should be mentioned that this effort is being done in a time where the methods and expectations of communication are drastically changing. The future of newspapers is very much in doubt. Social networking is quickly reshaping the way we communicate and interact. Citizens continue to expect more and faster information from their government, and yet seem less informed and involved with

the process. This plan has been written, in part, to help clarify concepts and information to make our communication with our target audiences more effective.

Guiding Principles

Proactive vs. Reactive

The intent of the communication plan is to take a proactive approach versus a reactive approach. The idea is to plan and execute a communication plan that creates the channels of communication and the tools necessary to achieve the goals, rather than to simply respond to inquiries.

Two-way vs. One-way

Connected with the principle of being proactive is the idea that the communications of Ottawa County needs to be two-way rather than one-way, so that Ottawa County is always listening to our citizens and engaging in dialogue to understand their needs and wants and their suggested solutions.

Open vs. Closed

The intent is to maintain an open and transparent government, supported by our communications, rather than one that is closed. Information needs to be shared throughout the organization as well as throughout the community. Openness creates a sense of belonging and teamwork, whereas closed communication patterns breed suspicion and paranoia.

Inclusive vs. Exclusive

Including everyone in the communications process builds teamwork and a feeling of belonging, breaking down the feeling of “we-they” which is common in many governments and in relationships of government with citizens. The goal is to include everyone who cares to participate and to motivate those who are not currently engaged.

Strongly Themed vs. Scattered Messages

A communication plan built on strong themes is more effective than one with unrelated and scattered messages. The communication plan should support, reinforce and reflect the overall mission and goals of Ottawa County.

Communication with Citizens

Strategy A – Organize Communications Around miOttawa.org

Existing Tactics

- Develop and maintain a website that offers information about services and increases opportunities to access services via the internet.

- Utilize convenience fee revenue generated from services offered online to support and expand the development of miOttawa.org.
- Rely on media coverage and newspaper inserts (annual report) to communicate with citizens.

Future Tactics

- Continue the development of miOttawa.org utilizing emerging technologies termed web 2.0, such as blogs, video sharing, podcasting and syndicated web feeds (RSS) that allows collaborative and interactive communication opportunities.
- Aggressively promote the capabilities and services of miOttawa.org through various means including online commercial search engines, print media and departmental direct contact.
- Move away from “push” marketing strategies such as newspaper inserts that promote a county service without the opportunity for interaction with the user. Move towards “pull” marketing strategies, such as miOttawa.org and various social network technologies, which promote and make available our services to target audiences in new and innovative ways.
- Continue to develop and adhere to a “brand”, presenting all information about Ottawa County using common themes and appearance. This is critical to achieve greater understanding regarding the overall role of the County, to generate and maintain clear messages and to maintain and increase credibility. Include an evaluation of the current County seal and logo and assess the potential value to change the I0go and implement use of it.

Action Items

1. Evaluate the current contract with our website consultant, specifically to answer the question of whether more development is warranted in tight budgets or if we move into a maintenance mode. {completed – contract extended}
2. Develop policies and procedures to guide the use of emerging web 2.0 technologies. Change current procedures and methods of releasing information, such as posting agenda packets and the County Administrator’s Digest on the website to be automatically fed to users. Implement and closely evaluate pilot projects utilizing social networking, looking at the amount and quality of public use against the cost of implementation and maintenance of these efforts.
3. Implement and closely monitor the use of an Ottawa County brand on the website, social networks and other media pieces. This includes keeping miOttawa.org as the “one place to go” for information, allowing individual departments to control the content on their portion of the website but retaining all benefit from the traffic they attract in the aggregate.

Strategy B – Implement New Methods of Communication with Citizens

Existing Tactics

- Rely heavily on printed material, either newspapers or brochures made available in public places or distributed by mail or by newspaper insert.
- Traditional media (newspaper, radio and television) has covered events and reported the message or content of the story.
- Website created as a location to find information about services and promoted as the place for people to gather information and access services in a different and often more convenient way.

Future Tactics

- Utilize tactics outlined in Strategy A to develop a more interactive website that utilizes new technologies allowing individuals to be automatically notified of changes in information posted on miOttawa.org. The website would also allow for increased access to services and encourage communication and participation in government rather than just posting information, adding to the transparency of government.
- As traditional media sources spend less time at meetings and generating stories to inform citizens, we spend more time packaging and sending out the message and content of what we need citizens to know. Expanding our online communication services would allow for the distribution of information that traditional media has not covered.
- Expand efforts to increase public participation, such as utilized in the citizen budget meetings. Utilize the website to support these activities, making documents such as the Budget-in-Brief available broadly.
- Utilize emerging technologies to improve our ability to provide immediate information for emergency or hot issue topics. Offer this as a service or otherwise collaborate with local units in this effort.

Action Items

1. Evaluate the current staffing model of employees involved in public information and marketing efforts. Answer the question if the current decentralized model is more effective than moving to centralize the role of public information and marketing into one position or one department.
2. Continually monitor national trends and our own experiences with new technology and methods of communicating. Answer the questions if we are reaching our targeted audiences with effective information and adding to the transparency of government.
3. Evaluate the following efforts relating to public participation; citizen budget meetings, citizen academies, and an improved process to recruit and retain citizens serving on volunteer boards and committees.
4. Create a “speaker’s bureau” of personnel available to speak on a variety of topics to civic groups, service groups and churches on a variety of topics.

- Post this information on miOttawa.org and mail to service clubs in the County.
5. Examine the use of social networking tools to instantly release critical information or otherwise comment on topics critical to the County.
 6. Enhance ties to existing local news shows (WHTC Talk of the Town, WCET Georgetown Journal, etc.) to better engage the community on issues of County importance.

Communication with Employees

Strategy A – Organize Communications Around Lotus Notes/Intranet

Existing Tactics

- Develop and maintain an interactive system on Lotus Notes/Intranet that posts information for employees.
- Supplement that communication with occasional emails on time-sensitive information.

Future Tactics

- Continue the development and provision of information on Lotus Notes, promoting the same “brand” strategy used on miOttawa.org on the intranet for employees.
- Evaluate continued expansion of online services for employees through the intranet.

Action Items

1. Continue investments in technology to support the infrastructure needed to support employees in their work and to increase their access to authorized information.
2. Evaluate and provide means for communicating with employees that may not have consistent access to Lotus Notes/Intranet.
3. Evaluate the information needs of employees that would prove beneficial.

Strategy B – Implement New Ways to Improve Employee Communications

Existing Tactics

- Utilize an employee survey every other year to garner feedback from employees on many issues, including communication.
- Continue to utilize existing methods to improve employee relations and communications such as brown bag lunches, employee edited newsletter “County Connections” and the labor-management cooperation committee.

Future Tactics

- Continue the regular use of existing methods on established timelines.

- Evaluate use of additional methods for employee communications, such as the posting of video presentations on Lotus Notes/Intranet and implementing blogs on special topics such as ideas for cost-reductions.
- Use the training program to improve the skills of supervisors to clearly communicate with their employees.

Action Items

1. Continue current initiatives.
2. Use video posting and a cost reduction blog on a trial basis.
3. Consider new program offerings in the training program for supervisors regarding communication.

Communication with Other Stakeholders

Board of Commissioners

Existing Tactics

- Continued focus and reliance on the strategic and business plan to guide the decisions of the Board and direction given to the organization.
- Consistent and open communication through such vehicles as the County Administrator's Digest, department annual reports and periodic ranking and survey exercises to gather input.

Future Tactics

- Continue current initiatives.
- Experiment with the use of paperless agendas, trying to obtain efficiencies while maintaining the supply of all necessary information for the Board to make effective decisions.
- Provide restricted access via the County website to select information based on Agency needs.

Action Items

1. Review the cost-benefit analysis of the use of paperless agendas. {handout – cost of packets}
2. Implement a new agenda process with the ability to post full agendas and agenda packets on the County website. Gather Commissioner feedback on applicability of this process to meet their information needs; are further improvements needed, would this process inhibit their ability to efficiently access the information needed for them to make decisions.

Other Levels of Government

Existing Tactics

- Utilize quadrant meetings, monthly newsletter "Ottawa County Update" and the County Administrator's Digest to maintain effective communication with local units of government.

- Utilize a legislator breakfast at the annual MAC Legislative Conference and maintain a lobbyist contract to influence state and federal legislators.
- Strengthen roles in state, regional and national professional organizations to maximize our influence regarding state and federal legislation.

Future Tactics

- Continue to evaluate the current initiatives through improved performance measures and surveys of Commissioner and legislator satisfaction.
- Continue to develop new applications on miOttawa.org that can both distribute more information to local officials but also be offered for use by local governments.

Action Items

1. Distribute a survey on communication topics for Commissioners and other government officials to survey their needs and rate our performance.
2. Gather feedback on offered and potential website applications that would be of value to local government units.

Media

Existing Tactics

- Provide agendas and agenda packets at meetings in paper.
- Sent press releases to media outlets via fax and email.
- Often have been reactive to requests for information from media outlets, utilizing the traditional method where they come to us to cover news.

Future Tactics

- Post agenda packets and press releases on the website with an application that would automatically notify or send media outlets this information for their immediate attention and review.
- Develop improved media relations.

Action Items

1. Develop and implement a website application to post agenda packets and press releases with automatic distribution to media sources.
2. Develop a method through the existing public information and marketing employees to regularly provide a list of "top ten story ideas" with associated content to media outlets.
3. Provide new offerings in the training program to prepare employees for effective media relations.