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Colleen Killingsworth

## Abstract

Applying the single case study method to investigate to what extent local governments value and practice excellent public relations will help to improve the performance of local government communications. The purpose of this case study is to gain a deeper understanding of how the principles of excellent public relations apply to a specific context. The results found the lack of political support for corporate communication poses a number of constraints to strategic and effective communication. This case study revealed interesting implications for further study, including exploring public relations theory related to the need to develop a model for public sector communication.

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# Municipal Government Communications: The Case of Local Government Communications

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## Background

As citizens, we rely on government policies and regulations to manage and maintain our civil, democratic societies. Out of the three levels of government – federal, provincial, local – local governments have the most influence over our day-to-day lives. How local governments communicate with and engage their citizens directly impacts their ability to maintain peace, order, and good government.

Lacking direct experience in government communications but having an intense interest in policy and politics, the researcher chose to focus this case study on the role and value communication plays at the municipal government level.

Canadian municipalities handle 95% of all emergencies and are responsible for public security and emergency management (FCM, 2008). Municipalities also build, own and maintain the majority of the infrastructure in Canada, and are responsible for approximately 55% of Canada's total greenhouse gas emissions (FCM, 2008).

According to Garnett (1992), how municipal governments respond to and communicate about these and other issues, including affordable housing and homelessness, and recreation and public arts, “affects more people and with greater consequences” (14) because the issues tend to be more important and difficult to manage than many of those facing businesses and non-profit organizations.

Cutlip, Centre and Broom (2000) recognized that “government touches every aspect of society and virtually every facet of government is closely tied to and reliant upon public relations” (488). Without an informed and active citizenry – which happens through trained communications professionals – elected and appointed officials may lose touch with the true needs and interests of their constituents according to Cutlip et al. (2000).

Citizens have come to expect more out of government communications. Municipal government's audiences, according to Garnett (1992), are diverse and require communicators to develop layered communications strategies that include intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, organizational, and public communication levels, as well as the ability to target and analyze audiences.

The effectiveness of local governments depends on the degree to which its citizens participate, from reading newspapers, to voting, and supporting their community associations. Ideologically, local governments provide more accessible means to become an active member of government (Raadschelders, 2003).

Studies have shown that local public administrators and managers often value special interest-group involvement in government as not only can they exert influence, but according to Rainey (2003) they can “often provide useful information about policy issues and group positions” (109).

Communicators who have worked in government often note that developing and implementing communication strategies in government organizations is different than in business or non-profit organizations. However, Grunig & Jaatinen (1999) noted that while the principles are the same for all organizations – government, business, and non-profits – “the specific conditions to which the principles must be applied are different” (219). As in all organizational communications, it comes down to defining the target audiences and the type of relationships government wants to establish with its stakeholders (Ki & Hon, 2007).

This case study will focus on the value of and communications practices at the local government level.

### Research Problem

Despite extensive literature on the nature of organizational communications, and government communications at the federal, state and provincial level, there is little research exploring government communications at the local or municipal level. Investigating to what extent local governments value and practice excellent public relations to build relationships with their constituencies is important to the advancement and scholarship of the field. Demonstrating value and communications performance are “perhaps the most important variables to be included in the Excellence factor” according to Grunig & Grunig (2002: 314). Research in this area can help to improve the performance of local government communications.

### Research Questions

Using the experience of communications at a large municipality in western Canada as a case study, this research paper will examine three core research questions:

***RQ1: How and to what extent do the executive, managers, and politicians at a large municipality in western Canada value communication?***

This question gauges the value the municipality places on asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical forms of communication developed and implemented by professional public relations practitioners.

***RQ2: How must public relations be practiced and the communication function organized for it to contribute the most to municipal government effectiveness?***

This question reveals the role of communications in connecting municipal governments with key publics to build communities, reduce uncertainty and develop mutually beneficial relationships. It also reveals how the communication function must be organized for it to contribute to municipal government effectiveness.

***RQ3: How and to what extent does the municipality use evaluation research to demonstrate the benefits of effective communication performance?***

This question explores how the municipality uses evaluation and measurement metrics to demonstrate the benefits and value of effective communication programs.

### Organization to be Studied

The organization to be studied is a large municipality in western Canada, which continues to experience substantial population and economic growth, and is currently home to more than 1 million people. The municipality maintains 29 major and 40 regional parks and 635 kilometers of

pathways for use by its citizens. There are two local daily newspapers, 25 local radio stations, and six local television stations covering municipal issues.

The goal of this case study is to examine how and to what extent the municipality values and practices excellent public relations.

### Literature Review

In order to clarify the concepts under discussion in this research paper, the following definitions will guide the analysis:

*Defining democracy:* From a theoretical and ideological perspective, “democracy refers to a state system in which sovereignty is formally invested in the citizens” (Raadschelders, 2003: 98). According to scholar John Stuart Mill (1806-1873),

Local government was the school for democracy [...] in the case of local bodies, besides the function of electing, many citizens in turn have the chance of being elected, and many, either by selection or by rotation, fill one or other of the numerous local executive offices. In these positions they have to act for the public interests, as well as to think and to speak, and the thinking cannot all be done by proxy. It may be added, that these local functions, not being in general sought by the higher ranks, carry down the important political education which they are the means of conferring to a much lower grade in society” (Raadschelders, 2003: 100).

From the broadest perspective, democracy “includes direct participation in local community institutions, active control of elected politicians through the party system, and social as well as economic rights to ensure adequate resources for citizens’ political activity” (Sorensen, 1998: 10-16).

*Defining municipal government and local government:* The terms “municipal government” and “local government” are used interchangeably and refer to cities and towns, and the utilities and special services, such as emergency services, that are affiliated with them. The terms do not refer to provincial or federal government.

*Defining communications and organizational communications:* “Communications”, “organizational communications”, and “public relations” are used interchangeably.

*Defining public relations:* “Public relations”, “communications” and “organizational communications” are used interchangeably.

Cutlip, et al. (2000) defines “public relations as the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (6). Coombs (2001) defines public relations as “the use of communication to manage the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders” (106). According to Flynn, Gregory and Valin, public relations is “the strategic management of relationships between and organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest” (qtd. in Flynn, 2008: para 4). In government communications, “public relations is the means by which an administrator interacts with the citizenry and is held accountable” (Lee, 2000: 452).

Lesly (1991) points out that “literature dealing with the subject almost universally uses the term ‘public relations’ – weather describing the role of consultants in proxy fights, referring to government information efforts, discussing employment opportunities or other matters” (6). He also notes “public affairs is confusedly used to describe what happens in government and policy-making more often than when dealing with organizations’ relations with government and public groups” (Lesly, 1991: 6).

*Defining public information:* Research has shown that governmental organizations are more likely to “practice a public information model of public relations and less likely to engage in two-way communication” (Grunig et al., 1999: 219). According to Turney (2000), “the federal government backed away from the term public relations” and gave the function a “less offensive, and more public-spirited label... public information” (1).

*Defining excellent public relations and communication management:* Grunig (2001) states that excellent public relations “builds long-term relationships of trust and understanding with strategic publics of the organization—those that affect or are affected by the organization as it identifies and pursues its mission” (21). Grunig (1992) goes on to state, “excellent public relations is an integral part of an excellent organization [...]. Excellent public relations can help the rest of the organization be excellent” (248).

To develop a global theory of public relations, Vercic, Grunig, Grunig & Wakefield consolidated the ‘Excellence’ variables and principles into three dimensions: “strategic management, symmetrical communication, and characteristics of the public relations department” (Grunig et al., 1999: 221). The principles related to strategic management state:

That a public relations unit should be headed by a manager who plans programs strategically, public relations should be empowered in the dominant coalition, it should be involved in the strategic management of the overall organization, public relations activities should be integrated into one function, and public relations should be a function separated from other functions, e.g. marketing” (Grunig et al., 1999: 221).

The principles related to symmetrical communication state:

Organizations should communicate with their external public symmetrically and similarly use the two-way symmetrical model in their internal communication. In addition, excellent public relations departments share characteristics such as having the knowledge to practice symmetrical communication and to manage the public relations function strategically, recruiting diverse communication employees in both management and technical roles, and taking social responsibility” (Grunig et al., 1999: 221-222).

The studies suggest “excellence in public relationships has direct effects on relationship quality between organizations and publics. Relationships with publics provide the best indicator for the effects of excellence in public relations rather than reputation or image” (Yun, 2006: 309).

Grunig, et al. (2002) also recognizes that “excellent public relations managers help bring the values and goals of different functional managers together by working with them to build relationships with relevant publics and bring perspectives of those publics into strategic management” (307).

*Defining ethical communications:* “That government communication and ethics are intertwined has long been known” (Garnett, 1992: 229). Ethical communications has its foundation in truthful communications. “Truth in communicating involves accuracy in communicating, avoiding falsehood or misrepresentation whether by including false information, deliberately excluding vital information, or deliberately allowing people to misinterpret a message” (Garnett, 1992: 229). Garnett (1992) argues that “to have the most value, however, truth in communicating needs to include usefulness, openness, and fairness as well as accuracy” (229).

The events of 2003 provide a good example of the growing public distrust of government communications because of the lack of “truth in communicating” about events surrounding the Iraq war. “With trust in politicians and public institutions already at an all time low, cynical attempts to manipulate the media and the hostile coverage which greets every revelation of spin foster a

corrosive cynicism” (Stayner, 2004: 433). He also warns that if this cynicism is reinforced, “it may destroy what little trust there is left in government communications” (Stayner, 2004: 433). While Stayner (2004) is referring to government communications at the federal level, it has implications for all levels of government communications, including the local level.

*Defining strategy or strategic:* Garnett (1992) points out that while there is no general consensus on the definition of ‘strategy’ or ‘strategic’, there are a number of concepts that consistently emerge.

A strategic approach involves systematically integrating information across fields, departments, and organizations; considering more than the technical aspects of managing; thinking situationally—taking relevant political, economic, administrative, social, legal, and personal factors into account; and devising strategy appropriate to organizational strengths, weaknesses, and competition” (38).

*Defining issues management:* Heath (2001) defines issues management as “the management of organizational and community resources through the public policy process to advance organizational interests and rights by striking a mutual balance with those stakeholders and stakekeepers” (36).

*Defining crisis communications:* Organizational communications scholars have identified “multiple stages in the life cycle of an issue: nonexistent, potential, dormant, imminent, current, and critical” (Cutlip, Centre & Broom, 2006: 326). They go on to define crises as “issues confronting the organization that have reached the critical stage” (Cutlip, Centre & Broom, 2006: 326).

Garnett (1992) advocates that “communication during a crisis should [therefore] be contingent upon the situation” (204) and proceeds to establish a framework for government communication during a crisis – crisis identification, when the public administrator should appear on the scene, establishing and mobilizing the crisis team, implementing a crisis plan, communicating the outcome, acknowledging individual efforts, and evaluating the crisis response (Garnett, 1992: 204-216). Garnett (1992) notes, “winding down a crisis properly is almost as difficult as mobilizing for one... failure to announce resolution can lead to confusion, which prolongs the chronic phases of crisis or complicates recovery” (215).

*Defining the role of the media in government communications:* “Close media scrutiny of government plays an indispensable role in governance. Government is often more accessible, and it is more appropriate to watch it carefully, because government spends the taxpayers’ money” (Rainey, 2003: 105).

Research has shown that there has been a shift in how the news media report on government affairs. What use to make up the majority of a local television newscast, now accounts for almost 10% of all stories. According to Lee (1999), “the tone of media coverage of the government has [also] shifted from the traditional adversarial model to one of cynicism” (454).

Lee (1999) also notes advocates that policymakers should develop media skills and that “public managers need to learn how to deal with the emergence of public journalism because it has the potential of being an ally, rather than an opponent, of public administration” (457).

The 24-hour news cycle and the “tension between speed and accuracy in the ratings-driven news environment” (Stayner, 2004: 420) also impacts government media coverage.

When considering the role media plays in democracy, Raboy & Taras (2004) state, “the mass media is a vital measure of the democratic health of a society. The mass media are to a large degree the public squares, the meeting places of modern life” (60). The authors also note that the media serve as “a reflecting mirror that allows citizens to see and communicate with each other” (Raboy & Taras, 2004: 60). Media also “pervades the informational environment, and this in turn influences public opinion” (Rainey, 2003: 106-107).

*Defining public participation:* At a general level, public participation is “the practice of consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities

of organizations or institutions responsible for policy development” (Rowe & Frewer, 2004: 512). In Canada, a number of significant reports and legislation have called “for increased public participation at national and local levels, in realms as diverse as health care, the environment, transportation, and local government” (Rowe et al., 2004: 512), as well as in resource development.

*Defining evaluation research:* Similar to the definition of public relations, there is confusion over what constitutes evaluation and measurement. There is also a lack of agreement of whether or not the outcomes of public relations programs can be measured. Because evaluation is often defined from the perspective of the function analyzing the activity, many companies approach public relations activities from the view point of “justifying expenditure” (Watson, 2001: 259).

The Dictionary for Public Relations Measurement and Research defines “public relations effectiveness” as “the degree to which the outcome of a public relations program is consonant with the overall objectives of the program as judged by some measure of causation” (Stacks, 2008: 17).

Cutlip, Center & Broom (1994) define evaluation as using research to systematically “measure program effectiveness” (406). Rossi & Freeman (1993) use the term “evaluation research” and “evaluation” interchangeably to represent “the systematic application of social research procedures for assessing the conceptualization, design, implementation, and utility of [...] programs” (5).

According to Cutlip et al. (2006), “evaluation research is used to learn what happened and why, not to prove or do something... true evaluation research is done to gather information objectively” (364-365). Cutlip et al. (2006) have identified three levels of program evaluation “preparation, implementation, and impact” (367). They go on to discuss how each stage helps to increase understanding and provides for additional information required to assess the programs effectiveness.

Preparation criteria assess the quality and adequacy of information gathering and strategic planning. Implementation evaluation documents the adequacy of the tactics and efforts. Impact evaluation provides feedback on the consequences of the program. No evaluation is complete without addressing criteria at each level (Cutlip et al., 2006: 368).

One emerging evaluation and measurement theory, “evidence-based public relations” combines measurement and experience and “moves measurement from the back end of a program and making it the proverbial prequel [...] [it] is the act of shaping strategies around hard facts and research that’s gathered before the planning stages begin” (Weiner & Heymeyer, 2008: 1).

Evaluating and measuring communication performance to show return on investment is a challenge for both public and private sector communicators; however, Garnett (1997) points out that “the costs of government communications are generally easier to measure than are its benefits, making it difficult to demonstrate a favorable performance ratio” (10).

In a nationwide survey in 1998, Lindemann (1990) found that 57.4% of the respondents believed that outcomes of public relations programs can be measured (41.8% disagreed). The study also found that while research is widely accepted by most practitioners as part of the planning process, 94.3% agreed that research is talked about more than it is done.

When considering evaluating government performance as a whole, to which communications plays a leading role, Raadschelders (2003) offers the following:

Performance can be analyzed as part of a policy evaluation, based on such ‘hard’ approaches as cost-benefit analysis or design science. Performance can also be evaluated according to the softer approach of citizen appreciation for government services. Another way of understanding performance is by looking at so-called planning disasters or policy failures” (270).

*Defining public sector environment:* Public relations and communications professionals often move between the public and private sectors and tend to influence the way communications is practiced based on their experience in each sector. However, it should be noted that according to Liu & Horsley (2007), “the public sector environment creates unique constraints and opportunities that ultimately distinguish government public relations from corporate public relations” (378). They highlighted a number of constraints facing the public sector that are not found in the private sector, including “politics, public good, legal constraints, devaluation of communication, poor public perceptions, lagging professional development” (Liu & Horsley, 2007: 378).

While small ‘p’ politics can be found in the private sector, politics is the foundation of the public sector. Liu & Horsley (2007) noted that public organizations are “defined by political actions and relationships. In the public sector, politics may restrict creativity and innovation in developing communication programs because elected officials do not want to appear too far out of the mainstream” (378).

Private sector organizations are established to make a profit and provide value to shareholders; whereas the public sector is concerned with the public good and the social impact of their initiatives. Viteritti (1997) stated that “meaningful communication between government and the people is not merely a managerial practicality. It is a political, albeit moral, obligation that originates from the basic covenant that exists between the government and the people” (82).

Liu & Horsley (2007) also highlighted “...the lack of importance often placed on communication by management” (380) which is one of the primary environmental constraints facing public sector communications and often results in skilled communicators leaving the public sector.

Another constraint that tends to devalue government communications is public perception. According to Liu & Horsley (2007), “the negative connotations of the term *propaganda* and the derogatory use of *spin* often make the public cynical about the intentions of government communications” (380).

Garnett, stated that “government’s traditional use of one-way models of communication, rather than two-way models, often limits dialogue, thereby diminishing the role of public feedback” (qtd. in Liu & Horsley, 2007: 380).

### Case Study Method

Applying the case study method to investigate to what extent local governments value and practice excellent public relations to build relationships with their constituencies will be useful in helping to improve the performance of local government communications.

Single case studies are considered by Yin (2003) an appropriate research method “when it represents a critical case in testing a well-formulated theory” (40). By studying how local governments value and practice excellent communications, the researcher assessed to what degree a large municipality in western Canada values and practices excellent public relations. The purpose of this case study was to gain deeper understanding of how the principles of excellent public relations play out in a specific context.

Another advantage of the single case study is when it captures a commonplace or typical situation (Yin, 2003). While research has been done on government communications from a federal, state and provincial level, very little research has been undertaken specifically at the local level to determine to what extent local government communicators implement the principles of excellent public relations. As Yin (2003) states, “the lessons learned from these cases are assumed to be informative about the experiences if the average person or institution” (41).

Although case studies are criticized by some for not contributing to scientific generalizations, they are not designed to provide a “sample” as in quantitative research. Instead, their role in evaluation

research “is to explain the presumed casual links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies. A second application is to describe an intervention and the real-life context in which it occurred” (Yin, 2003: 15).

As recommended by Yin (2003), multiple data sources were used to strengthen the design of this case study, including interviews, documentation and archival material. Triangulating this data around the study’s three research questions enabled the researcher to develop “converging lines of inquiry” based on historical, attitudinal and behavioural issues (Yin, 2003: 98).

### Justification for Questions Used in Interviews

In order to study the role and experience of communications at a large municipality in western Canada, the following interview questions were drafted around three research questions, which formed the structure of this case study:

***RQ1: How and to what extent do the executive, managers, and politicians at a large municipality in western Canada value communications?***

Interview questions:

- 1A. From your perspective, do the executive, management, and politicians value communications?
- 1B. Does the city use communications to build relationships with key constituents?
- 1C. Are communication directors, managers, leaders and strategists involved in management decision making at the city? Are they considered to be part of the dominant coalition?
- 1D. Is the communications function separate from other functions at the city?
- 1E. What barriers to communications exist at the city?

***RQ2: How must public relations be practiced and the communication function organized for it to contribute the most to municipal government effectiveness?***

Interview questions:

- 2A. Does the city integrate all communication programs into a single department or provide a mechanism for coordinating programs managed by different departments?
- 2B. To what extent do you think the city practices two-way symmetrical forms of communications with its key publics?
- 2C. In your opinion, do the city’s communicators possess the skills and knowledge required to function at the management level?
- 2D. To what extent are communications programs developed for strategic publics identified as part of the strategic management process?
- 2E. In your opinion, what changes, if any, in organizational structure or internal policies would enhance the city’s communications programs?

***RQ3: How and to what extent can the municipality use evaluation research to demonstrate the benefits of effective communication performance?***

Interview questions:

- 3A. Does the city evaluate and measure the benefits and value of its communications programs?
- 3B. What methods does the city use to evaluate and measure the benefits and value of its communication programs? Do the evaluation metrics tie to the organization’s overall business objectives and outcomes?
- 3C. How do the city’s communicators report on the outcomes and value of their communications programs?
- 3D. How does evaluation research contribute to the communications planning process at the city?
- 3E. In your opinion, do you believe the city’s communications programs are effective?

## Data Collection Methods

The evidence for this case study came from three main sources: interviews with executives, directors, and managers from a large municipality in western Canada, current documentation, and archival material.

Since the driving question behind this research was to understand how and to what extent local governments value and practice excellent public relations, interviewing the senior administrators engaged in communications planning was key. Based on the municipality's organizational structure, there were three individuals who are most intimately involved in communications planning and therefore stood out as good sources for qualitative data. These were the city manager, manager of communications and partner services, and manager of corporate marketing and communications.

According to Yin (2003), "interviews are an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs" (92). Interpreting how and to what extent the municipality values and practices excellent public relations is a sociological exercise that entails gathering data on the role and function of public relations within the organization. Open-ended interviews are considered an effective way of eliciting key facts, opinions, and insights from individuals during a case study (Yin, 2003).

Documentary evidence was derived from a review of the municipality's business and communications strategies, print and electronic communications products, organizational charts, and communications policies and procedures. This was useful in corroborating the information gathered during the interviews.

It was also important to review some archival material, such as awards, communications audits, communication program evaluations, and reports. Particular attention will be given to information in the material that pertains to the principles of excellent public relations.

## Data Analysis Techniques

To guide the analysis of the evidence gathered in this case study, the researcher used the theoretical propositions of Grunig, Grunig & Ehling (1992), "public relations contributes to organizational effectiveness when it helps to reconcile the organizations goals with the expectations of its strategic consistencies" (86) and Grunig et al. (1999), "organizations are likely more effective when their public relations function helps to build strategic, symmetrical relationships with key publics. Strategic public relations in a government agency should not differ from public relations for corporations or other types of organizations" (222). This approach is described by Yin (2003) as "the most preferred strategy" to case study analysis as the proposition "helps to focus attention on certain data and ignore other data" (111).

Applying the pattern-matching technique enabled the researcher to show links between the data collected and the principles of excellent public relations identified by Grunig, et al. (1992). Pattern-matching strengthens a case study's internal viability when the results coincide with the expected patterns (Yin, 2003). Yin (2003) describes pattern-matching logic as "one of the most desirable techniques" for case study analysis (116). The dependent variable being investigated in this case study is the degree to which public relations is valued and the independent variable is the extent that the principles for excellent public relations are applied at the large municipality in western Canada. Data gathered from the review documentation and archival material was used to corroborate the interview evidence.

## Results

The five individuals interviewed for this case study are listed below:

- (1) City Manager
- (2) Director of Customer Service and Communications Corporate Services
- (3) Manager of Communication and Partner Services
- (4) Manager of Marketing and Communications
- (5) Former Manager of Citizen Engagement

In addition to interviews with these three individuals, secondary research was gathered by reviewing organizational charts, briefing notes and guidelines, communication and partner services communication guidelines, staff development and training overview, and strategic communications plan at a glance overview.

The archival material used in this case study included the 2008 communications initiative overview documents, 2008 communication tactics survey results, 2007 citizens satisfaction survey results, 2008 external communications focus groups presentation, communicating to key stakeholders briefing note, 2008 client satisfaction survey results, 2008 briefing notes and media releases measurements document, 2008 executive issues management report, and an issues management case study.

***RQ1: How and to what extent do the executive, managers, and politicians at a large municipality in western Canada value communication?***

All interviewees agreed that the perception and value of communication varies based on the individual and his or her experience with or exposure to the outcomes of professional communication strategies.

While respondents noted that they believe aldermen see their role as communicating with the public, respondents reported that aldermen tend to only use the media to do so, and do not demonstrate a good understanding of issues management and the role communication corporate services could play in helping them to engage with their constituents. According to one respondent, the role of communication is “under appreciated and undervalued at the city, and aldermen do not think it is used properly.”

However, more than one interviewee noted that they considered the mayor to be a strategic and pragmatic communicator and that he values the role of communication.

Executive and managers who have engaged in communications early on have a greater appreciation for its role than those who tend to engage in communications as an after thought. While many of the managers and executive understand the importance of communicating, most are “short on understanding that communication needs to influence the operational decision and not just communicate about the decision,” says one respondent. There tends to be a lack of understanding of the role communicators can play as the ‘devils advocate’, testing all sides of the equation when making operational decisions.

When asked if the city uses communication to build relationships with key constituents, the majority agreed that it does. The customer services and communication corporate services business unit has developed and implemented a citizen engagement policy and have trained over 600 staff at the city to ensure consistency in the consultation approach. However, it was noted that there are a few managers who have not adhered to the policy which has reflected poorly on the city’s communication reputation.

One interviewee highlighted that while the city uses the skills of the communication corporate services business unit to engage the public, it does not engage communication corporate services in managing relationships with other constituencies / stakeholders, such as the provincial government, school boards, and health services. In her opinion, the professional stream does not engage or share

with or engage the city's communicators in managing these relationships from a communication perspective.

Most interviewees agreed that communication function is not part of the dominant coalition and is not represented at the management table on a consistent basis with the exception of a few communicators who have built trusted relationships with the managers they support. "There are 29 business units at the city and management teams do not seem to be including senior communicators at the table on a consistent basis" said one interviewee. Management teams tend to be very operationally focused and do not welcome communicators who want to talk strategy. Communication is respected at a tactical level, but many of the executive and managers do not see communication as having any possible influence on the decision making, or strategic level of the organization. "Communication is not allowed to be part of that conversation," said one interviewee. However, according to one respondent, just because we "don't have communication at the table, doesn't mean it's not valued."

There are a number of barriers to communication that were repeatedly identified by the interviewees.

- **Public perception** of communication and the belief that municipal spending on advertising and communication is a waste of tax payer dollars. Because of the political ramifications of this perception, it has been difficult to attract and retain the resources required to effectively communicate about municipal programs, services, and issues.
- The **political environment** prevents the municipality from communicating on an issue until council has voted on it. Council is often reluctant to have the municipality communicate on the facts of the issue because they don't want the administration to influence the public. Quite often by the time the municipality is able to engage in communicating on an issue, it has spun out of control during the political process and the municipality is criticized for having a lack of or poor communication.
- Lack of understanding of the **strategic function** of communication has prevented communication executive from becoming part of the dominant coalition. While there is a perception that communication is a more tactical rather than a strategic function, a number of senior communication managers are working more closely with directors than in the past.
- Ability to measure ROI – there is a low understanding of the value communication provides from a qualitative perspective.

***RQ2: How must public relations be practiced and the communication function organized for it to contribute the most to municipal government effectiveness?***

The structure of the communication function at the large municipality in western Canada is a hybrid model with a certain number of communicators reporting into the customer service and communications corporate services business unit (formed seven years ago) while others are embedded in business / operational units with a dotted reporting line back to the communication corporate services business unit. The municipality does not have the support of council to have a large communication department. The municipality has over 500 products and services and 29 operational business units that the communication function supports to various degrees.

The customer service and communications corporate services business unit has developed a number of tools and systems to ensure consistency and continuity in communication planning and implementation. The communicators at the municipality have also developed an internal communication community of practice to provide for improved communication among the city's communicators, professional development, and capacity building when required to support issues management and project or service focused communications.

Two-way forms of communication practiced at the large municipality come in the form of citizen satisfaction surveys and the development, implementation of a 3-1-1 call centre, the first of its kind in Canada, and the adoption of some social media tools and tactics. It was noted by one interviewee that executive and managers at the city tend to view communication a one-way. “The city has built the communication department with a traditional view of [government] communication, which is focused on one-way forms of communication,” said one interviewee. “We need a better understanding of two-way communications so they can promote that with their managers.”

The 3-1-1 call centre provides citizens with the means to call and provide input on city programs, services, or policies, which is then passed on to the appropriate department or business unit. Since its launch in 2006, the city has received 1.2 million calls into the 3-1-1 call centre, which is the equivalent of speaking with every household three times. The system is equipped with a data and knowledge management system, which provides for the generation of performance management reports that are reviewed by the executive, management, and operations business units. This level of reporting has assisted the city’s executive and managers in decision making.

The municipality is in the process of updating its website and online capabilities to enhance its means of two-way communication and citizen engagement. The municipality is currently testing the use of blogs, Facebook, and other e-government, citizen engagement tools.

While the communicators at the large municipality in western Canada are reported to have the communication skills and knowledge required to perform their jobs, the majority of interviewees agreed that some are lacking some of the business skills and competencies (financial management and economics) required to function at the management level. “It is important for communicators to understand the business they are working in,” said one interviewee. She also acknowledged that it can take a long time to develop that expertise or knowledge. Given that the city’s communicators are supporting over 500 services and programs, their knowledge of the business tends to be at a pretty high-level unless they have been embedded in a particular business unit.

From a business planning perspective, the city adopted a business planning model three years ago, and is currently entering into its second term of business planning. Generally, business planning only takes place at the department level and is not mandated at the business unit level. Therefore, if there are no business plans, there are likely no project plans which pose a challenge to communicators who are trying to tie their communication strategies to business objectives to support the overall business plan. It was reported that when business plans do exist, they are generally developed at a high level and do not contain a lot of detail or measurements. It was acknowledged that the value communicators brings to the managers they support comes in the form of the communication advice they provide.

“If there are only a certain number of managers that allow you to be in the strategic game because you created a level of respect, how are you going to get the others through the door?” asked one interviewee. “Those that are respected and have the skill [to function at the management level], don’t have time to mentor and train those that don’t have the skill set because they are sought after,” she concluded.

In one respondent’s opinion, the city’s communicators are:

[...] willing and ready to develop strategic [communication] plans. One of the advantages they have is that they can work right across the corporation. When there is a project that goes across several departments, we can respond. Operational business units are structured differently and struggle with the fact that we work across several departments. This structure works particularly well with issues management and allows us to be nimble.

Two other respondents noted that while communication is adding value to management, what is missing is better efficiency of the communication channels. A lot of communication happens through the media and the council. “We need to get better at communicating directly to key stakeholders,” said one respondent. “We haven’t built strong communication mechanisms that can be leveraged for different programs. For every program, we have to rebuild the methods for communicating with key stakeholders since there are no formal channels to communicate with all of the different stakeholder groups.”

When asked what changes, if any, in organizational structure or internal policies would enhance the municipality’s communication programs, three out of the five respondents indicated that a centralized approach would improve communication programs.

The city has embarked on a sustainability review to look at how the communication function is structured and whether or not the current structure is sustainable. The current hybrid model poses challenges to junior communicators as it is often difficult for them to receive guidance from a professional communicator when they are embedded in an operational unit. One respondent noted that one policy change that needs to be made is to include a communication strategy along with the reports going to council to help inform council as to what can be done to support programs and services from a communication perspective.

Another highlighted that fact that the current structure allows for significant errors to take place publicly since there is not a strong linkage between the communications corporate services business unit and the communicators who are embedded in the business units. From an operational perspective, the culture at the large municipality allows for inconsistent adherence to corporate policies and procedures. She said, “In many cases, operations decides what is communicated, not the communications corporate services department. We can see the train wreck coming; we just can’t do anything about it,” said the same interviewee.

One example alluded to by all respondents is the issue of the 3-1-1 call service being overwhelmed by callers complaining about snow and ice removal. The communicator embedded in the roads department developed a news release stating what the city was doing about the snow removal, and what the city council policy is regarding snow removal. The director of customer service and communication corporate services provided input on the release, however, did not have the authority to have final sign off given the fact that the communicator reports directly to the general manager for roads. The release was changed and released without the communications corporate services business unit being aware of the change which directed citizens not call the 3-1-1 call centre with their snow removal complaints. This resulted in public embarrassment and the perception that the city has poor communication.

Another respondent suggested that having a corporate communication function that is small and nimble and reports to the city manager and council would be the best model.

***RQ3: How and to what extent can the municipality use evaluation research to demonstrate the benefits of effective communication performance?***

The municipality uses a number of methods to measure satisfaction around communication tools and tactics, including 3-1-1 call volumes, web trends data, media monitoring and tonality analysis, and stakeholder and citizen satisfaction surveys. The customer service and communications corporate services department also measures internal client satisfaction with the level of communication they provide. The challenge they have is gathering quantitative data to help measure effectiveness and return on investment of their communication programs. While they are doing evaluative research to measure satisfaction, it was noted that evaluation and measurement is an area they need to focus on more. Often measuring the return on investment is overlooked because the decision is made to spend the budget required for evaluative research on the communication program instead of on evaluating its effectiveness.

The director of customer service and communications corporate services and members of her management team reports the communication performance measurements to the administrative leadership team twice a year. It was noted that the communication performance measures are not reported up to council and that the politicians are not seeing the benefits, value and return on investment of the municipality's communication programs.

When asked if, in their opinion, they believe that the city's communication programs are effective, one respondent indicated that the municipality does a good job at raising awareness of operational issues and creates the opportunity for the public to be aware, e.g. recycling, road closures, and pool construction.

Another noted that it depends on the program. "Where you can show through the use of surveys that consumptive behaviour was changed, yes you can show impact," the interviewee said.

However, another respondent noted that while a lot of improvements have been made in the city's communication programs, there is a concern that "we can't demonstrate the effectiveness of our project."

Two interviewees noted that the large municipality in western Canada has been recognized by its peers as a leader in municipal government communication.

### Conclusions and Limitations

Overall the results of this case study revealed that the perception and value of communication at a large municipality in western Canada varies based the individual and their experience with or exposure to the outcomes of professional communication strategies.

Executives and managers who have engaged in communications early on have a greater appreciation for the role of communication than those who tend to engage in communications as an after thought. There tends to be a lack of understanding of the role communicators can play as a strategic advisor.

Communication is not part of the dominant coalition at this municipality, and it does not have input into the decision making processes of the corporation. The hybrid model for structuring the communication function at the municipality splits the decision making for what is communicated and how it is communicated between the customer service and communication corporate services business unit and the managers of other operational business units. The lack of a centralized approval process and oversight of municipal messaging and reputation can lead to public embarrassment and a diminishing reputation for city communication.

The customer service and communications corporate services business unit has developed a number of tools and systems to ensure consistency and continuity in communication planning and implementation at the municipality. They have also developed an internal communication community of practice to provide for improved communication among the city's communicators, professional development, and capacity building when required to support issues management and project or service focused communications.

Two-way forms of communication practiced at the large municipality come in the form of citizen satisfaction surveys and the development, implementation of Canada's first 3-1-1 call centre, and the adoption of some social media tools and tactics. It was noted by one interviewee that executives and managers at the city tend to view communication a one-way.

Respondents believe that the city's communication programs are effective at raising awareness of operational issues and creating the opportunity for the public to be aware, e.g. recycling, road closures, and pool construction.

Interviewees confirmed that this municipality has come a long way in understanding the importance of and valuing communication. One interviewee noted that the municipality is “way farther ahead in strategic communication here than other municipal government departments.”

This case study demonstrated that some of the principles and traits of the Excellence model for communication exist at this municipality. However, it is interesting to note that Liu & Horsley (2007) highlighted the importance for expanding public relations theory beyond the “one-size fits” all model for public relations and for the need to develop a model for public relations practice for the public sector (391).

Since this case study represents the first foray into public relations research for this researcher, inexperience and all that it implies are givens. Given that the researcher also has a relationship with more than one of the interviewees, it should be noted that there is the possibility of research bias in this study. A steadfast effort was made by the researcher to undertake this case study with a critical and objective eye; however, due to her personal connections to the interview subjects, this prior experience may have predisposed her to cast the municipality’s efforts in a favourable light.

The time constraints posed by interviewees’ availability and data collection may have resulted in a less meticulous approach to analysis and subsequent duties vital to the case study’s integrity.

This case study revealed interesting implications for further study, including examining the differences between communications at small municipalities versus large municipalities, examining the difference between the Canadian and American municipal government communication context, and exploring evolving public relations theory related to the need to develop a different model for public sector communication.

## Appendix

### Interview Questionnaire for the Large Municipality in Western Canada Managers

#### **Introduction:**

I am working toward my Master's degree in Communications Management at McMaster University. One of the course projects I need to complete is a case study involving 3-4 interviews as part of the research phase. The subject I have chosen to study is local government communications. The following questions have been assigned in an attempt to gauge to what extent the municipality values and practices excellent public relations. I will gladly share a copy of my final report when it is completed in February.

With your permission, I would like to tape record our interview. Do you have any questions before I begin?

#### **Interview Questions:**

1. From your perspective, do the executive, management, and politicians value communications?
2. Does the city use communications to build relationships with key constituents?
3. Are communication directors, managers, leaders and strategists involved in management decision making at the city? Are they considered to be part of the dominant coalition?
4. Is the communications function separate from other functions at the city?
5. What barriers to communications exist at the city?
6. Does the city integrate all communication programs into a single department or provide a mechanism for coordinating programs managed by different departments?
7. To what extent do you think the city practices two-way symmetrical forms of communications with its key publics?
8. In your opinion, do the city's communicators possess the skills and knowledge required to function at the management level?
9. To what extent are communications programs developed for strategic publics identified as part of the strategic management process?
10. In your opinion, what changes, if any, in organizational structure or internal policies would enhance the city's communications programs?
11. Does the city evaluate and measure the benefits and value of its communications programs?
12. What methods does the city use to evaluate and measure the benefits and value of its communication programs? Do the evaluation metrics tie to the organization's overall business objectives and outcomes?
13. How do the city's communicators report on the outcomes and value of their communications programs?
14. How does evaluation research contribute to the communications planning process at the city?
15. In your opinion, do you believe the city's communications programs are effective?

#### **Conclusion**

We have reached the end of my questions. Before we wrap up, is there anything else related to the practice of public relations at the municipality that you think we should discuss? Do you have any further questions or comments?

This concludes the interview. Thank you for taking time to meet with me. If I have any follow up questions or need clarification on your responses, may I contact you?

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