

CHAPTER 6: COUNTY COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

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CHAPTER 6: PUBLIC RELATIONS AND REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

by Wendy Manitta Holmes, APR, Public Affairs Director, Douglas County, CO

Imagine *a community* whose citizens and taxpayers know the role and value of county government in their lives.

They know how to reach their elected officials.

They are aware of the services provided by the county and how to access information about services and policies, as well as the various traditional and online means by which to engage in the process of County governance.

Imagine *local media* – whose role includes reporting about county government and who report in ways that are informed, and objective – working together with the county to help build and strengthen a community that is informed and engaged.

And imagine a county government who has learned how to mine for and tell stories of service, successful partnerships in the public interest, and other good-news stories – no longer relying exclusively on the media to do it for them.

For local governments, this can be the outcome of an integrated communications strategy, including a proactive media relations plan.

The plan is written with strong clarity as to whom they are trying to reach; what specifically they want their constituents to know and be able to do; what they want to correct, prevent or preserve; and what messages they want to communicate that will:

- Produce the desired behavior
- Change or sustain attitudes/opinions
- Increase knowledge and familiarity

Public Relations Planning

Formal public relations planning is approached as a four-step process:

- Research
- Analyze (planning)
- Communicate (implementation of the plan)
- Evaluate

Research

The research step is your opportunity to properly define the problem you are trying to solve/opportunity you are trying to seize. Research could be achieved in formal (scientific) methods and/or informal means, depending on budgets, size, and sample of your target, how much time you have to implement it, how will you use what you learn.

PLANNING: COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Planning includes setting goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics.

Traditional media relations, public engagement, online communication are all examples of public relations strategies.

Writing a news release, hosting a town meeting or a special event, holding a news conference, producing a newsletter, creating a social media site, or an online newsroom – these are all tactics and are selected as part of a plan based on the tactical ability to reach your target audience (s) via their communications preferences or location opportunity.

MEDIA RELATIONS

While media relations is only one of many communications strategies in which a county could engage, it may be one of the most important of all public relations strategies for counties large and small. Why?

Government is specifically identified in the Society of Professional Journalism Code of Ethics in this way when referring to the role of the professional journalist:

“Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public’s business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all.”

A positive, working relationship with the media is necessary for county governments whose leadership recognizes the reputation vulnerability associated with a passive or reactive approach to the media who follow county news.

For many the decision to implement a proactive media relations strategy begins with recognition that your reputation is an asset as important as your personnel, cash, accounts receivable, inventory, investments, land, buildings, and equipment. In addition – while neither will want to admit it in the bright light of day – in most situations the media will need you as much as you need them.

Members of the media assigned to your county can be a powerful and effective conduit for information distribution. A strong working relationship with the media, who – with your help and/or the help of your subject matter experts, are informed of the role of county government and its services – will report on the county and increase the likelihood of accuracy and objectivity in the ultimate story.

Media – Neither Friend nor Foe

In a perfect world, the media are neither friend nor foe. They have a job to do, and they are coming to you for information. Reach out to them proactively – help them understand the assets you have that they may need. Remember you have an organization full of the subject experts on all aspects of county government.

Due to the multiple topics they cover, they may misunderstand the complexity or even the fundamentals of the topic they pursue. They need your help. On topics that are not under investigation – (or other information that is not public information and therefore not able to be disclosed) it's much better to do what you can to assist and if you cannot, politely explain why.

Keep in mind, they are storytellers with a link to your constituents and have a job to do that they will do with or without your help.

NOTE: Establishing and sustaining strong media relationships takes more than a once-a-year or once-a-quarter check-in. As with any other important relationships, there are many reasons to make this a priority – and for some counties is a daily or even weekly occurrence.

Proactive media relations helps you: 1) build the organization's reputation for transparency, accountability, and openness, which leads to trust; and helps you 2) boost credibility of the county and its leaders as ethical stewards of public assets.

NOTE: The time to launch your plan for building strong media relationships is NOT during a crisis.

Having your plan in place before a crisis hits, helps position your county for effective communications directly with constituents and through the media, thus navigating challenges to the county's reputation and increasing the opportunity for media objectivity when issues do arise.

WHAT'S YOUR MEDIA RELATIONS POLICY?

When thinking about the foundational elements for a positive, working relationship with traditional media, having a media policy in place can aid in your responsiveness to an inquiry and foster a relationship for the media with a reliable source who is authorized to articulate the County's position or convey needed information.

Your Media Relations Policy can be as simple as this:

Media Relations Policy

Only designated spokespersons should provide information to any media agency, reporter, or representative of the media as the 'official' County position on any matter concerning or affecting Douglas County.

The Public Affairs Director is the primary media contact and source of County information.

For issues related to a specific elected or appointed office, the Elected/ Appointed Official will be the designated spokesperson or appoint an appropriate designee.

Employees should immediately refer and notify his/ her immediate supervisor or Department Official if contacted by the media and immediately notify the Director of Public Affairs. (Douglas County Colorado Media Relations Policy, Employee Handbook, October 2014 Revision)

State of the News Media – Our Reality

Today's environment for journalists is a frantic 24-7-365 news cycle. Newsrooms understaffed with reporters who are doing more with less, under great time pressure.

Most have little desire to tell the good news of government.

What does the Media Want most?

- Polite, timely responsiveness – 25%
- Access - 25%
- Reliable, accurate information – 25%
- A credible source – 25%

What do County spokespersons want most?

- Objectivity in reporting
- An opportunity to put our best foot forward
- Reasonable time to respond
- Fair and full disclosure of the news angle in play
- To be a trusted, reliable resource

FOUR STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL MEDIA RELATIONS

- Prepare for the opportunity
- Manage the opportunity
- Leverage the opportunity
- Sustain media relationships to a mutually beneficial end

Prepare

- ✓ Do you have a 'media as our partner' culture?
- ✓ Who manages your media inquiries?
- ✓ Do you know who covers your county news?
- ✓ Are you proactively engaged in media relations?
- ✓ Remember: the interview begins when you pick up the phone

Manage

Unexpected calls happen but can be managed:

- ✓ Thank the reporter for the call
- ✓ Ask for time to finish up your meeting/phone call
- ✓ Ask: "What is your deadline?"
- ✓ Ask: "What is the topic of your call?"

- ✓ Ask: “What is the best way to reach you and when?”
- ✓ FULFILL YOUR PROMISE to return the call.

Use the time before you return the call to find out as much as you can about the topic.

If you have no success ask reporter for additional input. If you learn that the topic is a personnel issue or a matter in litigation, stay in the truth about it. Do what you say you’ll do – remember the deadline.

First impressions matter. Be: polite, responsive, accessible, and available. You will be remembered and grow a reputation as a reliable, responsive source.

Leverage

We all have a story to tell. Know yours.

- ✓ Seize the moment with key messages.
- ✓ What message do you most want your constituents to know in context of this story?
 - Messages are building blocks for the story
 - i. Simple/clear – no jargon
 - ii. Consistent
 - iii. Sound bite format

Sustain the Relationship

- ✓ Understand what makes news
- ✓ Mine for human interest stories in your organization that personify your brand of government.
- ✓ Continue to grow your reputation for responsiveness, accessibility, and availability.
- ✓ Be a trusted media resource.

What is News-Worthy?

The reputation of individual Colorado counties is put under pressure every day through the unexpected. Newsworthy events for a county that will send a reporter to your doorstep could include: perceived or real budget issues; natural disasters; perceived or real personnel issues; rumors or real litigation; alleged or real ethics issues; controversial land uses; accusations of misdeeds; unpopular policy decisions; law enforcement issues; public health issues; perceived or real elections mishaps; delivery of property tax statements; increased assessed values; and more.

How you respond to these issues impacts your ability to effectively govern – and casts the direction of your reputation.

What about the Good News?

Yes. What about the good news? We know that county stories are happening all around you every day. In the delivery of your services, in the decisions you make, in the lives you change in positive ways. They are in your budget book, in your public meeting agendas and in the results of your

service on Boards and Commissions in the community, at the state and federal level.

They are new, money-saving online services; a new road, bridge, or health facility; sheriff's deputies that become cross-trained to drive a snowplow to help out during big winter storms; grant dollars for cultural events, veterans, youth services, persons with disabilities; constituents with stories of great service; awards and other accolades.

As mentioned earlier, limited newsroom staff, limited time to research and seek good stories to tell will likely prevent your good news from being told.....it's time to tell your own story.

TELLING YOUR OWN STORY

Whether your public relations strategy includes communications directly from the county to the community or is aided by the media as a communications conduit to the community, the reality of county government is that, *unless we proactively tell our own story*, no one else will.

Our communities will have very limited exposure to or knowledge of why county government exists and the role it plays in the daily lives of those we exist to serve unless we tell them ourselves.

One of the best communications strategies is a simultaneous effort to seize the opportunity to be the owner and author of your own story through channels you know will reach your constituents – through both traditional and online channels – combined with a strong media relations strategy.

You're asking, "Where do I start?" "How do I find the stories I want to tell?"

Begin by asking the question, "Is there a culture of support for storytelling in my organization?" If not, start with creating a storytelling culture. It will be difficult to sustain this journey without one.

If County leadership determines that telling your own story is a necessary and valuable part of your organizational mindset, the next step is developing a plan for collecting and sharing stories into your communication goals and incorporating storytelling into your responsibility of at least one staff member's core job duties.

Framing Your Story

The framing of your story makes all the difference. The framing/focus cannot be on what the County did, does, or will do, yet instead on the *why* of the story and *HOW* the story portrays the County's unique role in the delivery of services that have a positive impact on people's lives.

Key Point: The focus is not on you – the servant. The story focus is on who you serve. Telling the story from the perspective of those we serve, not about the County.

Decades of study reveal that using the word 'you' in a story increases readership and engagement. For example, in a 2015 subject-line study by Return Path, researchers learned that 'you' was the only pronoun that increased email readership.

The best stories focus on the reader and the reader's needs, thus increasing engagement and simultaneously linking you with your citizens and taxpayers by demonstrating your role in your community.

Photography and Storytelling

Visuals are an important companion to a great story, as they can almost tell the story in one glance before the story is even read. Visual storytelling done well

- Increases community engagement
- Accelerates comprehension
- Tugs at heartstrings
- Connects and persuades

Online Video – Power and Trends

Online video is a particularly powerful tool for humanizing a story, engaging a user, and embedding the evocation of emotion. It is a powerful way to reach viewers on smartphones and tablets. This is particularly useful for telling the story of service to our communities. In 2015, YouTube reports they saw a 46% increase in year-on-year views on mobile devices, with tablet views increasing an incredible 90% year-on-year.

Social Media

While the use of social media certainly varies county by county, the Pew Research Center has shared [results from a 2021 survey](#) of 1,502 adults on social media use. The survey found that “roughly seven-in-ten Americans say they ever use any kind of social media site,” with Facebook and YouTube remaining the most popular social media platforms in the nation. On a total population basis (accounting for Americans who do not use the internet at all), 81% of all U.S. adults are YouTube users and 69% are Facebook users, while 40% use Instagram, 31% use Pinterest, 28% use LinkedIn, 25% use Snapchat, and 23% use Twitter.”

The old marketing adage states, if you want to tell your story, “go where the people are.” If your county can sustain a social media strategy, there is certainly evidence to support that an online communications strategy is a valuable addition to your communications tool chest.

Print Publications

The distribution of county-produced publications is another traditional yet proven-positive means for keeping the public informed of county decisions and activities and one through which the county can control the story and the framing of the content.

Pros - For communities without reliable access to the Internet, production of printed materials can be a very effective means for reaching communities.

Note: Consider your distribution plan for a publication as part of the decision to produce a publication. Will it be hand-delivered to a local community gathering place (county buildings,

community meetings, libraries, coffee shops, grocery stores, schools, feed stores, community centers, etc.)? Will it be mailed, posted on a website in PDF form, and/or inserted in the local newspaper?

Your distribution plan – considered as part of the overall decision – will fully vet the cost of this communications channel before you begin the process of creation.

Cons - Unless produced entirely by county staff, the writing, editing, design, and print production of publications could be costly. The distribution method can also drive costs. In some cases, postage expense can make a decision to mail a publication nearly cost-prohibitive.

Many counties within communities that do have Internet access and produce printed materials chose to put an electronic copy of the publication on their website for viewing there, thus reducing print production costs.

STORYTELLING CASE STUDY

A Colorado county is preparing to announce the good news of its annual series of household chemical roundup events, the objective of which is to remove tires and other hazardous household chemicals and other dangerous materials from the waste stream and prevent illegal dumping, thus protecting water, land, air, wildlife.

The past-practice press release read:

Headline: *(X County) announces 2013 Household Chemical Roundup Events*

The past-practice lead paragraph read:

The Board of X County Commissioners is pleased to announce the list of Household Chemical Roundup Events for 2013.....(followed by a quote from an important person – probably your County Commissioner - the list of events, locations, dates and times and a paragraph that says, ‘For additional information, please call (xxx) xxx – xxxx.)

Past practice for news distribution:

You typed up the story, sent it to the local newspaper, television, or radio station, and hoped they would use it as is without edits.

Why this approach no longer works:

Any approach that leads with an organization, organizational leadership, or a brand – rather than the human benefit of the service, program, or initiative – is perceived as self-serving and an unsavory, deliberate attempt at self-promotion, pursuit of influence or power, a practice that journalists will not appreciate and that readers have difficulty tolerating.

We know that readers respond to common community needs and humans – not institutions. Without the focus on the reader’s need or perspective and without answering the ‘so what/why should I care’ question, you will face potential rejection, as well as a missed opportunity to tell your

story through the lens of your values, goals, and purpose.

Today's approach:

Headline: *Rid your home of hazardous chemicals*

Subhead: *A free, drive-up, drop-off site for household hazardous materials will be held in (X community) on Saturday, Sept. 12 from 8 a.m. – 4 p.m.*

New lead paragraph and second paragraph:

Is your garage turning into a storage area for unwanted paint containers, old automobile fluids, tires, used batteries, or burned-out light bulbs?

If you answered yes to any of those items, then mark your calendar for cleaning day and participate in the annual household chemical round-up.

Add a quote from your commissioner "Through our partnership with the public health community X county is working with the community to protect our streams and other water ways from the dangers of household waste. We're hoping members of the community will take advantage of this great opportunity keep our community clean."

On Sept 12, bring your driver's license, as well as your unwanted household hazardous materials to(insert information about the event location, date and time and what is acceptable to drop off, why this is good for the community, and a link to a web page to which the reader can find additional information.)

New practice for news distribution

You wrote the story, posted it in your online newsroom along with a strong, engaging companion visual (ideally a human being cleaning out their garage of such materials), distributed the newsroom post to subscribers of your website news feed (including the local media who are already subscribed), and posted it in your social media (Twitter, Facebook, Nextdoor, Instagram). In doing so, you are becoming your OWN publisher, telling your OWN story, AND providing the media with a pre-written researched story – with a companion visual – that they can use in its entirety.

Why would media use this version vs the old one? I was once told by the publisher of a major newspaper in the Denver market, "We see ourselves as much as the voice of the people as you do."

When our writing can make and sustain this shift, demonstrating that we are acting first in the public interest and not our own, we open the door and keep it open for common ground with journalists who need us as much as we need them.

The new approach can fulfill multiple County objectives: 1) provide readers with a solution to a problem while demonstrating your role in the community; 2) build your reputation as public servants acting in the public interest; 3) drive traffic to your website; and 4) drive readers to a location for more information using their smartphone, tablet or desktop computer.

Whether facilitated by a dedicated county communications professional on staff, by Commissioners, or as a shared responsibility within the organization, telling your story of service through the

distribution of timely, relevant information is vital to the effectiveness of your county government leadership.

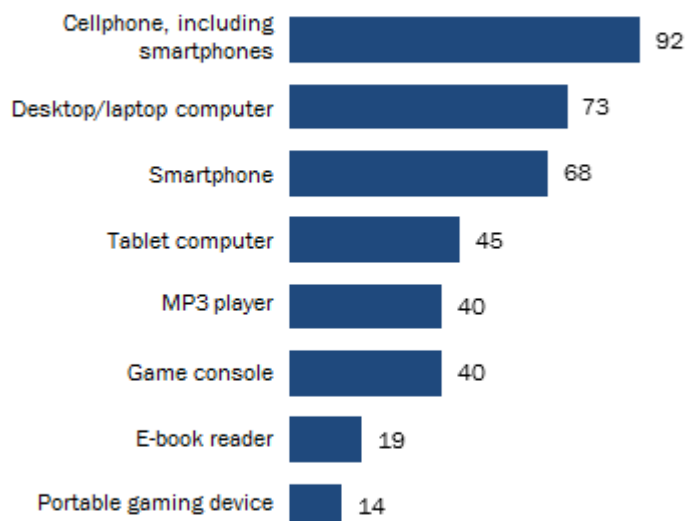
It's easy to identify with the appeal of simplicity in a complex world. Keep the story simple, make it simple to get more information, and write with a focus on the public interest.

PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY AS A DRIVER OF COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY AND TACTICS

According to the October 29, 2015, Pew Research Center report on [Technology Device Ownership](#), 68% of American adults own some kind of smartphone and 45% have tablets. The report goes on to say that smartphone ownership is, with some groups, reaching the saturation point, especially those aged 18-29 (86%); those aged 30-49 (83%) and those living in households earning \$75,000 and up, annually (87%). As of [April 2021](#), the percentage of Americans who own a cellphone of some kind has increased to 97%, with the share of Americans that own a smartphone having increased to 85%.

Cellphones, Computers Are the Most Commonly Owned Devices

% of U.S. adults who own each of the following devices



Source: Pew Research Center survey conducted March 17-April 12, 2015.
Smartphone data based on Pew Research survey conducted June 10-July 12, 2015.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Pew Research Center, [Technology Device Ownership 2015](#), October 29, 2015

Smartphone and Government Services or Information

A similar Pew Center Study just six months earlier – [U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015](#) – revealed that “smartphone owners of all kinds use their phone to help navigate numerous important life events,” **including 40 percent who use their smartphone to “look up government services or information.”** A more recent [2021 Mobile Fact Sheet](#) reports that “some 15% of U.S. adults are ‘smartphone-only’ internet users,” implying a corresponding increase in U.S. adults’ reliance on smartphones to navigate events and access information.

According to the same report, certain groups of Americans have a more predominant reliability on smartphones for online access: 28% of Americans ages 18-29 are heavily dependent on a smartphone for online access, and 27% of Americans with an annual household income of less than \$30,000 per year are smartphone-dependent compared with only 6% of Americans from households earning more than \$75,000 annually.

The Pew Research data underscores the influence of personal technology use on how we communicate with our citizens, taxpayers, customers, and other stakeholders.....and the increased opportunities we have to be the primary source of information.

YOUR COUNTY WEBSITE

Given the proliferation of smartphones and tablets and the demonstrated, significant use of these devices to look up government services or to obtain information, a responsive-design, mobile-device-friendly external website is a universally expected asset for county governments. Your website is a powerful source for keeping the public informed of county decisions and activities in a controlled-format – one in which your County is in the driver seat with how the story is told – in ways that demonstrate your unique role in your communities.

NOTE: While your website has the potential to send a powerful message of transparency and openness, keep in mind that if your website content cannot be obtained or is difficult to navigate from a smartphone or tablet, your county risks being perceived as *not* transparent. Beginning in 2024, county websites must also be accessible to persons with disabilities. C.R.S. §24-85-101 et seq.

According to the [Sunshine Review on Ballotpedia](#), County websites should include the following:

- Budget Information
- County government meetings/agendas
- Contact information and other key information about elected officials and elections
- Key information about administrative officials
- Building permits and zoning
- Audits (Financial Performance)
- Contracts
- Lobbying/advocacy
- Local taxes
- How access government records and public documents

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER (PIO) OR OTHER COUNTY COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONAL

While not every county has a PIO, nor is every communications function in every county structured similarly, for all the reasons stated above, it is important that someone cover the principal duties of this job function.

The primary responsibility of a PIO is to distribute accurate and timely information to the public proactively and during times of crisis, via traditional media and online means.

In most counties, the PIO serves as a contact person and information conduit for the media and public.

This person should be well versed in the daily operations of the county, including the basic functions of each county department.

In some counties, the PIO is also responsible for producing publications, maintaining the website, handling legislative affairs, production of videos, public opinion research, writing speeches/talking points for the Board of County Commissioners, answering constituent requests, conducting basic research on issues and writing news releases, and/or other external communications.

In many counties, the county administrator or manager can absorb most of these duties along with the commissioners themselves and the department directors.

It is up to each individual county to determine if these responsibilities warrant a full-time position within their county, or if the tasks can be divided between current staff members.

However, if the primary goal of disseminating accurate and timely information to the public and media is not being satisfactorily met, then the county should weigh the pros and cons of having a person serve in this capacity.