



Municipal Communications Strategy

10 Points

New Action - October 2015

A good communications strategy is essential for any municipality to get important information out to its residents. Understanding what communication channels and tools are available to a municipality, and which are used by community members, is essential for making sure that a town gets word to its entire audience. The way people get their news varies from traditional forms of media, to word of mouth, to social media and other online sources. Municipalities need to be where the people are. This action awards points to towns that assess the communication channels most used by residents, develop and implement a strategy to using such communication channels, as well as make their municipal websites easy to navigate with essential information posted.

The communications channels must be used and the website maintained on a regular, ongoing basis. Because technologies change so quickly, a town must submit updated documentation (below) for each certification cycle to receive 10 points for this action.

Why is it important?

So much happens within every municipality that needs to be shared: upcoming events, new programs, sustainability initiatives, important updates, celebrations of success, changes in leadership, etc. Municipalities have an opportunity to share such happenings as a means of promoting the good things they are doing, as well as to inform residents of timely news. Since we know that people use different methods of communication to receive information, from the digital to the more traditional, municipalities have a responsibility to disseminate such news in a variety of ways.

Word of mouth through social community networks is arguably the most effective way to share information, but ineffective as a sole means of communication. Our world has changed drastically over the past decade with the development of digital technology. And with that, the way we communicate and receive our news has transformed as well. More and more, people are getting their news from online sources such as Facebook and Twitter.

Though it is a static way to share information, the municipal website should not be discounted. The vast majority of residents use the town's website as a means of finding all of the important information dealing with the goings on of a town, and expect to find everything they need when they arrive. Because of this fact, a town must make sure to have a website that addresses the needs of the community and is easy to navigate.

A good communications strategy will aid in relationship building and restoring trust between residents and their government through strategies that engage the public in determining which channels should be used and what information is most necessary.

Who should lead and be involved with this action?

There are several municipal staff who should be involved in the implementation of this action, including the municipal clerk or public records custodian (likely to be the lead), the IT coordinator or web professional, and/or the staff member who is responsible for public communications.

Timeframe

The inventory of communications channels and decisions on which to use on a regular basis should not take long to complete. The portion of this action that may take some time is getting the website up to these standards and creating a communications strategy to use the channels effectively, which may involve working through a third party web professional if a town does not have such a person on staff.

Project costs and resource needs

Outside of updating and maintaining the current municipal website, this action does not require much of a financial investment. Depending upon whether the website and/or social media sites are maintained in house or by a third party company, the costs will vary. Staff time will be required to implement and analyze the public communication survey results, and to train the appropriate staff that will be utilizing the communications' channels.

What to do, and how to do it ("How to")

Below we have a snapshot of the requirements for earning 10 points for this action.

Required to receive 10 points:

Step 1: Inventory all public communication channels available to the municipality and being used by residents. The inventory should address the methods listed in the guidance section below.

Step 2: Regularly maintain the municipal website, keeping content updated while providing a way for users to find important updates, news and other highly requested information. The website should strive to make the most sought after information easy to find, as described in the guidance section below.

Steps 1 & 2 in more detail: We have provided guidance and recommendations for implementing the action. It is not required that you follow this guidance exactly as long as the final product meets the requirements. However, we strongly recommend a few overview resources that provide examples and guidance on how to implement most of the elements of this action:

Note: Keep in mind that the inventory is subject to the Open Public Records Act, in case you plan to include sensitive information such as dedicated phone numbers and passcodes.

Step 1: Inventory all public communication channels available to the municipality and being used by residents. A good practice would be to keep a list of the relevant web addresses and contact information (i.e. Twitter handle) for each municipal communications' channel. Consider the following channels and any others that may be available within the community:

- **The municipal website**
 - Note: A traditional news bulletin is a great way to share important information and breaking news. If it is promoted well, it can be the go-to location for people to find updates and alerts. South Orange posts a [news bulletin](#) on its website with important information.
- **All municipal social media channels, including Facebook and/or Twitter**
 - Note: A great resource is GovLoop's "[The Government's Guide to Using Facebook.](#)" The University of Pennsylvania's Fels Institute of Government has a useful guide and review of social media's role in local government operations, including the integration of social media into operations, management strategies, monitoring, and examples of towns' adoption social media practices – "[The Rise of Social Government.](#)" Police departments are great indicators of how social media can enhance the effectiveness of their operations. A [recent study](#) from the International Association of Chiefs of Police found that "96% of police departments use social media in some capacity, and more than 80% say it has helped them solve crimes." A good example is [Oakland, CA's](#) police department which uses Nixel, Twitter & Text-a-Tip to send safety alerts and crime tips to the public.
- **Local commercial/non-profit media such as regional and community newspapers and online news sites**
- **Municipally controlled mailing and email lists**
- **Municipally controlled blogs**
 - Note: Blogs are a great way to share breaking news, human interest stories, highlight town updates, promote an event, etc. If the municipal website doesn't not have a blogging function, there are sites where dynamic, easy to use blogs can be created for free. Some even provide responsive mobile designs at a very low one-time cost, like [Wordpress](#); [Blogger](#); [Medium](#).

- **Municipally controlled mobile applications**
 - Note: More and more towns are getting in on the mobile app revolution. With a growing percentage of people using smartphones each year, this is a great way to reach a broad base within a community. [Middletown](#) uses a mobile app to share updates on public meetings, town wide events, alerts, etc.
- **The municipal public access channel, where applicable**
- **Local radio station, where applicable**
- **Online & traditional community posting boards**
 - Note: Traditional community posting boards can be found throughout a town at the library, community and senior centers, hospitals, municipal hall, etc. Such spaces online are starting to catch on. Platforms such as NextDoor, iNeighbors and NeighborLand are typically for community members to share ideas, to serve as neighborhood watch, and as virtual garage sales. But more recently, in places where community members are present on such platforms, public safety departments and governing officials have begun participating to post updates and news.
- **Municipal advisory boards or agencies that service the socially vulnerable populations within the community, and**
- **Community based networks, including but not limited to faith based organizations, civic associations, education based groups such as the PTO/A, local businesses, etc.**
 - Note: Take into consideration the demographics of the town, including age, cultural, and geographic factors, as well as existing community based networks, etc. to better understand a community's audiences and which communications channels are most accessible to them. Incorporate additional public communications channels relevant to such audiences in the inventory. [U.S. Census Data](#) can be a good place to understand the demographics of the town.

Step 2: Regularly maintain the municipal website, keeping content updated while providing a way for users to find important updates and news. Most searched information on a municipal website includes:

- Email addresses and phone numbers for all municipal departments
- Contact information for emergency services such as police, fire, EMS
- A place to find updates and current news related to the municipality
- An events calendar
- Links to social media accounts
- Email sign ups
- A search box
- A suggestion box

Refer to Sustainable Jersey's "[Digitizing Public Information](#)" action for a full list of recommended information to be posted on a municipal website.

Note: Websites should be easy to use, regularly maintained, house important news and current events, provide highly requested information in an easy to find location, and serve as a means for self-promotion.

"Responsive design" or "mobile ready" means that the website is formatted to read well on a smartphone or tablet. This is very important since more and more people are using mobile technology to visit web pages. All website building/design tools offer responsive design templates for a small fee, and web designers can help create a mobile ready site for towns as well. The Monmouth University Polling Institute completed an analysis of N.J. municipal websites in 2013, with criteria such as how easily basic information can be found, opportunities for citizen interaction, ability to perform government services online, and integration with social media. A poll of the public identified the top things that people look for on their municipal website, including information on trash/recycling, contact information, permitting, public meetings, taxes, schools, activities/recreation, emergencies, budget, and crime statistics. Read the [full report](#). This article discusses the why's and how's behind [New York State's extensive web redesign](#).

Additional Considerations and Best Practices:

- According to the Open Public Records Act (N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq.) any communications made via online platforms in an official municipal capacity are considered "public records" and are subject to public information requests. There are fee-based tools that can archive social media communications, such as ArchiveSocial.com, Smarsh.com, and Mirror-Web.com.

- Social Media Policies:
 - While OPRA mentions public records online, it does not specifically address social media, and the Government Records Council has not yet issued guidance for municipalities using social media. It is recommended that towns adopt their own written external social media policy. The following content is recommended in any social media policy:
 - A list of the types of social media content that is considered a public record under O.P.R.A.
 - What procedures will be used to capture and store the records
 - Guidelines for municipal employees to archive comments and other material on other social media sites, and
 - The required length of time that the records must be archived, including those retained by third-party service providers
 - Establishing an internal communications or social media policy is a good idea. Rather than responding to an employee representing the town in a negative way through one of many communication platforms (whether traditional or digital), it would be beneficial to be proactive about what type of conduct is and is not acceptable. Philadelphia's [social media policy](#) is a good model that outlines conduct and standards for staff representing the City via social media platforms. The Institute for Local Government links to various [sample social media policies](#). Victoria, Australia developed a [creative four minute video and handout](#) that explains their employee social media policy. Montclair's [social media policy](#).
- The National Archives released a white paper on [Best Practices for the Capture of Social Media Records](#) which includes examples of how federal agencies use social media, copies of their social media policies, and a list of available archival tools and relevant platforms.

Recommendations:

- Municipalities may want to survey residents to inform the communications strategy and website overhaul. The purpose of such a survey would be to find out the communications' channels residents are currently using and would likely use to get news, and the reasons they have visited the municipal website, as well as information that was/was not found. This can be done through a simple email, a questionnaire, survey or polling tool shared through email or mobile phone, a scheduled "live" chat over Facebook or Twitter, or commenting application on the website.
- A town may want to establish a municipal committee to assist in the coordination of the inventory, dissemination of information on an ongoing basis, survey the public on useful communication channels, etc. Highland Park, N.J.'s resolution creating a Public Information Commission is a good example (hyperlink to a downloadable copy).
- Visual aids: There are various methods, such as info graphics and maps that can tell a story in an easy-to-understand way and make public communications more effective. (Example: The [US Department of Energy](#) uses info graphics.)

What to submit to earn points for this action

In order to earn points for this action, the following documentation must be submitted as part of the online certification application in order to verify that the action requirements have been met. The communications channels must be used and the website maintained on a regular, ongoing basis. Because technologies change so quickly, a town must submit updated documentation (below) for each certification cycle to receive 10 points for this action. Towns must complete the downloadable [submission checklist](#).

1. Description of Implementation – Please use the text box provided on the submission page for this action to share of any details on what has been accomplished and the impact it has or will have on the municipality beyond what was contained in the submission checklist.
2. Upload a completed [submission checklist](#)

IMPORTANT NOTES: There is a limit of six uploaded documents per action and individual files must not exceed 20 MB. Excerpts of relevant information from large documents are recommended. All action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submissions should not include any information or documents that are not intended to be viewed by the public.

Spotlight: What NJ municipalities are doing

While we have not yet come across a town which has specifically completed an inventory as outlined in this action, there are a number of towns using public communications channels effectively.

Millburn Township (Essex County)

Millburn received 10 points for its Municipal Communications Strategy submission. The Township inventoried all of its communication channels including social media, message boards, public press, etc. This detailed inventory helped the town assess strategies already in place, and steps that can be taken to better communicate with the community in the future. [View supporting documentation here.](#)

Resources

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT WEBSITE CONTENT:

PlainLanguage.gov's ["Checklist for Plain Language on the Web"](#):

Usability.gov provides guidelines for design, content and user experience on government websites

SOCIAL MEDIA & OTHER DIGITAL COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS:

Animoto – free platform to create video and slideshows from still photos, video clips and music; easily embed final product into emails and website

Facebook – a free site where a town can engage its residents by starting discussions, sharing events, etc.

Flickr – free photo sharing application

Instagram – a free photo sharing (Sacramento Police Department use for their "Day in the Life" series: <https://instagram.com/sacramentopolice/>)

NeighborLand - collaborative tool between neighborhood and city officials and planning departments in order to pose questions, collect feedback, and create actions out of proposals. (Examples: San Francisco, Houston, Portland and Lowell, MA use for visioning and planning projects)

NextDoor – a free private website for neighborhoods to connect and share information; people must show proof of address to gain access in order to keep the membership genuine; police departments use it to post updates, news, safety alerts, tip requests, etc. (Example: New York City uses NextDoor to provide residents with updates and generate discussions around issues)

QR Codes – free to create, allows users to share tourism, emergency updates, promotion of specific website pages instantly when scanned by a smart phone. Example: Alexandria, VA puts QR codes on parking meters to provide visitor and parking information to the public. There are loads of free tools to create QR codes; here are a few: <http://qrstuff.com>, <http://qrcode.kaywa.com>, <http://qurify.com/en/>, <http://delivr.com/qr-code-generator>

RSS – imbed onto a municipal website and the audience can subscribe to receive automatic updates on blog entries, news headlines, audio, video, etc. A web developer can install this, or it can be done for free. (Examples: [Summit](#); [Medford](#))

Wiki page – very popular free website to house static information about a municipality; users can add to it and it is easily updated

Tumblr – free photo and video sharing application

Twitter – a free platform to share news, updates, photos, and start conversations through live Twitter chats

YouTube – a free video sharing of speeches, TV appearances, archived public meetings, PSAs, etc.; use Insight function to see who is viewing videos; second biggest search engine after Google

TOOLS TO GATHER PUBLIC INPUT:

Google Forms – free way to create a form or questionnaire that can be embedded into an email or on a website

Facebook – a free site where a town can engage its residents by starting discussions, sharing events, etc.

Nixle – a mobile and email application that will provide community announcements and emergency alerts to the public, some for free including emergency and public safety alerts

Poll Everywhere – a fee-based polling platform based on size of audience; allows for real time polling

Survey Gizmo – a fee-based email & mobile survey tool

Survey Monkey – a fee-based survey tool for email & mobile

Textizen – a fee-based (set up and training fees) platform that allows sending project updates, event reminders, surveys or polls to the public; uses a web based platform where towns can easily analyze data. Get [examples of cities](#) using the tool.

Twitter – a free platform to share news, updates, photos, and start conversations through live Twitter chats

OTHER RESOURCES:

Center for Digital Government – a national research and advisory institute on information technology policies and best practices in state and local government. They have produced a one page document: [“7 Best Practices for Governing 24/7”](#)

Government Social Media LLC – provides free resources on archival of records, policy development and using social media during emergencies and to gather public input

GovPilot – fee based platform that allows departments to go paperless and connect through an internal dashboard, share data, set up work flows, communication with constituents through notifications, create map visualizations using GIS and create forms online so residents can submit requests, pay obligations, register for services, etc. 201.222.1155 (NJ users: Morristown, Passaic City, Union Township)

Info graphics – a powerful way to tell a story through visualizations. There are sites you can use to create info graphics for free: [Tableau Public](#), [PicktoChart](#)

Jersey Access Group – a membership group of cable access television and radio stations; a list of member stations is provided, though not every station in N.J. is a member - jaginfo@jagonline.org | 732-887-8581

List of Hyperlocal News Sites in NJ

List of Public Access TV Stations in NJ

Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) – a nonprofit focused on supporting local governments through consultation and free resources; provides a comprehensive list of best practices, tools, case studies and research geared around effective communication and public participation, from using technology to reach the citizenry, to engaging volunteers, to communication strategies, and more. mrsc@mrsc.org | (800) 933-6772

National Association of Government Web Professionals – an organization of local and state government web professionals working together to share knowledge, best practices, and innovative ideas to improve our capacity to provide value across the web to our communities - Katya Wowk, Northeast Region Director - katyaw@nagw.net

NJ-GMIS Chapter – an association of government IT leaders - Executive Director Mitchell Darer, mdarer@mresc.k12.nj.us

Nonprofit Tech for Good – free webinars, blog posts and other resources, tips and advice to effectively use social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, Google+, etc.). While it is geared around nonprofits, the information can easily apply to local governments. heather@npotechforgood.com

Open Public Records Act (P.L. 2001, CHAPTER 404, N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq.)

Pew Research Center – a nonpartisan “fact tank” that focuses on trends and issues that shape America through polling, demographic research, media analysis, and data. Conducts an annual study on smartphone usage (<http://pewrsr.ch/1COQzb9>) and social media trends, among other things, which can inform the work done within the community - 202-419-4300