

SBC Corporate communications and marketing strategy

Introduction

Communications touches every service and every interaction with the public; from the way it presents itself visually to the way our customers are treated, from its public advertising to its leaflets and forms, from its information to staff, to its consultation with user groups.

The modernising local government agenda has a significant impact on the way local councils communicate with their customers. The dominant themes are engagement, dialogue and interaction. These themes guide our approach to:

- Reviewing the way services are provided taking into account stakeholder's views
- Involving communities, increasing consultation and accountability
- Securing public endorsement for the political management system
- Working in partnership with key stakeholders in the public and private sectors
- Doing business electronically

Communications activity is a key driver in public perception of overall Council performance. Research suggests that keeping residents informed, listening to their concerns and involving them when making decisions has a significant impact on their satisfaction with the Council and its services.

Marketing techniques are an integral part of a forward looking communications strategy. If it is to be meaningful and have some longevity, the communications and marketing strategy must reflect the corporate aims and priorities of the Council.

Background

The Council's vision and aims and priorities for 2003 to 2006 are detailed below:

Our vision is to lead a Community and Borough, which is Prosperous, Safe, Healthy, Clean, and Green.

The key aims and priorities are:

Prosperity – working to ensure good employment opportunities and a flourishing economy, retail, leisure and tourism service.

Community Safety – working to ensure that people are safe in their home and in their neighbourhood.

Management of Public Spaces – working to ensure clean, tidy and attractive public spaces.

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Waste Management – working to ensure recycling targets for household waste are met.

Good communications and public relations work will help ensure that we make progress with our vision and objectives, by using effectively all available channels of communications to establish and maintain a good two-way flow of information and views internally and externally.

The Council also agreed a set of values in June 2003 which under pin the work of the council; these are summarised below:

We will...

- Work together as one team
- Focus on Customers
- Positively promote the work of the whole Council
- Aim for excellence and continuous improvement
- Be open, honest and fair
- Be a caring employer with high expectations of our staff

What is Communications and why do we need a strategy?

Communications happen all the time, across the Council. They support everything we do – from setting policies to providing services. Activities can range from one-to-one or business meetings to telephone calls, letters and memos, how we sign our buildings, leaflets, surveys, electronic communications, visual branding, newsletters and so on.

One definition (IDeA) is –

“Listening, encouraging feedback and continuous dialogue with all sections of the community. Convincing and influencing, using a variety of media appropriately and sensitively, and building and maintaining the networks through which to communicate”

We cannot choose whether or not to “do” communications. They are an integral part of what we do all the time and they are essential if democracy is to work properly. We can choose to “do” communications well. If we do it will add credibility to what we do, whether in terms of customer and staff satisfaction or our reputation with partner organisations.

The corporate communications and marketing strategy provides a strategic direction for the delivery of the Council’s communications. The strategy sets corporate communications objectives and sets out broadly how the Council aims to achieve them. The strategy will be progressed through an action plan that sets out detailed actions, the timescales, the costs and the responsibilities. The first action plan is included in the strategy but will be further developed as actions are progressed.

Communication and Marketing Strategic Objectives

Vision – “to enhance Civic Pride and the Image of Stafford Borough by communicating openly and effectively with the Council’s various audiences”

We aim to:

- Improve two way communications with our stakeholders; to have an understanding of what they want, consult with them and listen to their views
- To increase involvement and interest in Council activities and to engage the public in the democratic process
- Ensure the Council receives a higher level of recognition for its achievements and promote its reputation
- Raise awareness locally of the Council, its priorities and its services
- Ensure that Council is accessible and timely and those who need or want information have it, taking into account hard to reach groups and people with disabilities
- Improve internal communications with staff and Members
- Ensure that the branding of the Council is consistent
- Support good consultation practice
- Develop our website and intranet
- Monitor and evaluate the strategy on an annual basis

These strategic objectives will inform the Council’s approach to public relations, graphic design, marketing, internal communications, customer care, consultation, customer relationship management, website and intranet development.

Responsibilities

Everyone is responsible for ensuring that communications in their own areas of work are dealt with to corporate standards.

Senior politicians, the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors, with senior managers, are responsible for agreeing and monitoring:

- Corporate communications standards and performance
- A corporate communications strategy/plan
- Individual services communications strategies and plans

They are responsible for directing resources into communications work in support of the Council’s key aims and ensuring that everyone plays their part.

The Public Relations Unit is responsible, in the context of this strategy, for:

- Leading on all media relations work
- Advising managers and directors as appropriate

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- Maintaining and policing the corporate identity
- Providing PR services to members

Stakeholders/key audiences

The stakeholders/key audiences of SBC are:

Residents

Staff

Members

Partners within the public sector

Special interest groups including those with language or disability needs

Business community

Voluntary sector

Local and Central Government

Press/media

Principles

The following principles will be adopted in all communications:

- Integrity and honesty – providing a true picture of a situation and only withholding information for valid reasons of confidentiality; being proud of our achievements, but admitting to limitations; not raising unrealistic expectations; respecting confidentiality and data protection
- Clarity – use of jargon-free language and glossaries
- Openness and accessibility – providing information for all those that are affected by any decision we may make; ensuring processes are in place to give everyone the information they need to contribute to decision-making where applicable
- Inclusiveness – giving careful consideration to who we are communicating with; ensuring that we use tools and mechanisms appropriate to our audience, e.g. commitment to minimum font sizes, ensuring we make contact with “hard to reach” groups etc.
- Listening and responding – to all views and questions; recognising that all have a right to express valid views
- Accountability – giving clear messages about who is responsible for making decisions and explaining how decisions will be reached
- Consistency – to ensure that reports, publications and all other documents and letters relating to a subject are clearly identified
- Accuracy – ensuring that information is accurate and up to date

Primary publications and communications media

The following are the primary publications and communications media used by SBC:

Annual council tax leaflet

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Council's newsletter (Newsline)
Press releases
Members digest
Website including Kiosks (Riverside Recreation Centre)
Culture and Leisure promotional material
Markets promotional material
LA21 newsletter and promotional material (Sundial)
Annual report
Community Plan and Summary
Corporate compliments, comments and complaints procedure
Consultation materials and media including Area Forum
Internal communications media (including the intranet site, corporate information forum, executive summary, team brief, notice boards, Employee Assistance Network, R&D appraisals, staff surveys and use of email)

As a minimum all communication materials should:

- Be written in plain English and avoid jargon and abbreviations
- Include the SBC logo
- Be available in an accessible form for disabled or non-English speaking users
- Be published on the council's website or intranet as appropriate
- Be widely accessible
- Provide best value
- Be consistent with our values

Information on how we consult with our customers and staff is contained in the SBC consultation strategy.

Information on how we respond to customer compliments, complaints and comments is detailed in the SBC customer care framework.

Information on data protection and freedom of information are detailed in the respective SBC policies.

Internal communications

Achieving effective internal communications is a challenge facing most large modern public service organisations. Improving internal communications may enhance the experience of individual and/or groups of staff and managers working for the Council. It may also bring added value in the form of a more co-ordinated and consistent approach to the dissemination and exchange of information between staff and the citizens and other stakeholders in the Borough.

The key objectives for internal communications are:

- To keep staff involved, informed and consulted
- To facilitate effective and accessible two-way communication between staff and management

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- To improve cross-sectional communication and the sharing of best practice
- To improve the co-ordination of communications activity across the Council
- To ensure that staff understand how they can contribute to the council's aims, values and objectives and to create "buy-in"
- To establish good communication as a necessary part of each manager's responsibility for their staff
- To enhance the Council's ability to deliver its key priorities to its citizens, partners and other stakeholders
- To provide staff with information about the Borough Council which allows them to:
 - Do their jobs
 - Be well informed about issues that may effect them as employees
 - Have a clear sense of the authority's direction
 - Gain a greater understanding of corporate and section priorities and activities
 - Contribute to the development of best practice, policies and procedures
 - Develop a sense of belonging to the authority
 - Be positive about the Borough Council both as an employer and a provider of services to local people

How we are to deliver the objectives in this Strategy

An action plan has been developed (see Appendix 1); which will be monitored on an annual basis.

The Strategy itself will be reviewed on an annual basis

Date approved

2004