

The Power of Communication to Shape Public Opinion



There is no denying that public opinion is one of the driving forces in the success of your township's endeavors, both large and small. In this era of instant communication and growing distrust of government in general, support from your constituents and the media is more essential than ever in ensuring that your projects are successful. Public relations professionals earn college degrees and then spend a lifetime gaining real-world experience learning to shape public opinion.

But why is public opinion so important for township officials? For one very simple reason: You serve the public. It's much easier to serve when you have the public behind you. Perhaps even more importantly, once acquired, a negative image is much harder to shake than a positive one. In fact, if a string of high-profile court cases of recent years has taught us anything, it's that conviction in the court of public opinion is often more damaging than conviction in a court of law.

Michael Jackson, O.J. Simpson and President Richard Nixon were all accused of crimes for which they were never convicted, yet all saw their careers end with the accusations. Of the three, only Nixon was able to later revive his image to some extent. The reality is that you're only as good as your reputation. The only true way to manage your reputation is to act with honesty and integrity in all aspects of your public and private lives.

This continuing education article and accompanying self-assessment is worth 2.0 elective credits as part of MTA's Township Governance Academy. See page 22 for details.



OBJECTIVES

- Provide an understanding of the importance of public opinion
- Provide basic ideas on how public relations can help shape public opinion
- Provide real-world skills to use when communicating with various audiences

CORE COMPETENCIES

- To utilize public relations skills to position township positively
- To possess vision, especially relative to the township's needs or potential
- To communicate effectively

PUBLIC RELATIONS: COMMUNICATION ENERGIZED

When most people hear the words "public relations" (PR), they immediately imagine the spin doctors used by celebrities and politicians to manipulate words and news stories to their clients' advantage. The reality of PR is much different. Public relations can best be defined as image, reputation and communications management. How you speak, dress and act all have an impact on your image and reputation. In fact, when the realities of PR are understood, it's obvious that we're all practicing public relations every day. The real key is communication.

The best way to shape public opinion is to express your ideas and ideals clearly and to the right audiences. Remember, too, that communication is more than what you say or write. Your facial expressions, body posture, tone of voice, and other physical and emotional cues often tell as much about what you're really trying to convey as what you're actually saying.

Public relations is about building trust and relationships with your audiences, and getting your message to the right people at the right time. It's not about lying or half-truths, and it's not about advertising or publicity. Only the worst PR deals in spin. In the best sense, PR is about getting your story told. Integrity, truthfulness and transparency are the keys. Ultimately, PR is about good, well-planned communication.

HONESTY: STILL THE BEST POLICY

If communication is the most essential tool in shaping public opinion, then honesty is the most important aspect of communication. You're only as good as your reputation, and your reputation is only as good as your last action. Integrity is a fragile thing, requiring your care and attention at every turn. A single half-truth or outright lie can ruin the public's trust in you for a very long time. If you garner a reputation as someone who "bends" the truth, no one will trust anything you say.

Democracy depends on a knowledgeable citizenry whose access to information allows them to participate more fully in public life, help determine priorities for public spending, receive equal access to justice, and to hold their public officials accountable.

That isn't to say that mistakes don't happen. We're all human and, as such, we all make mistakes. However, any township official who accidentally provides inaccurate information to residents or the media should work to correct the mistake as soon as it is realized—preferably before it is discovered by someone else. In these instances, timing is crucial. The public will certainly be more willing to forgive your mistakes if you're forthcoming.

One of the most important aspects of honest communication, especially in terms of governmental communication, is transparency. Your residents' trust in you starts with their belief that the decisions you make are in their best interest or in the best interest of the community. The best way to foster public trust is by making sure all of your decision-making processes are open and accessible

to the public. A constituency that feels out of the loop or that information is being withheld is naturally going to assume that something is out of whack.

Transparency in government means that citizens must be able to "see through" its workings to know exactly what goes on when public officials transact public business. Government that is not transparent is more prone to corruption and undue influence because there is no public oversight of decision-making.

Transparency is a way of protecting fairness and ensuring the common good. When citizens know what their government is up to, they have a better chance of ensuring that decisions treat everyone equally and protect the common conditions that are important to everyone's welfare. Democracy depends on a knowledgeable citizenry whose access to information allows them to participate more fully in public life, help determine priorities for public spending, receive equal access to justice, and to hold their public officials accountable. ▶



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Communication: A Two-Way Street

It may be a cliché, but communication is truly a two-way street. An effective communicator is just as good at listening as speaking or writing. Your constituents count on you to listen to their questions, concerns and ideas, and act accordingly.

Have you ever been in a heated conversation and realize that your counterpart has no idea what you have been saying? It could very well be the manner that you are delivering the information, or it may be that your partner is a poor listener. Poor listening skills seem to be the majority and not the minority. We're so used to the fast pace of American society that we often forget how to slow down and just listen.

So how can we learn to be good listeners? Here are a few tips:

- **Make eye contact.** Let the speaker know that you are interested in what is being said.
- **Be slow to speak.** Sometimes people speak to "think out loud." Sometimes all they really want is a willing ear. To listen well, you must stop talking. Don't interrupt or put words in the other person's mouth.
- **Show gratitude.** Let the speaker know that you feel honored that he or she chose you with whom to speak.
- **Stay in tune.** Don't disappear in the middle of the conversation because your mind wandered. Whether you actually get up and walk away or let your mind wander elsewhere, it's just plain rude. If you find that your attention span is short, actively repeat what is being said to you as the speaker is talking (but remember not to interrupt).
- **Make sure you understand.** If you didn't hear or don't understand what someone said, have that person say it again. Ask him or her to explain, but remember to be courteous.

For example, a decision to allow a developer to build a shopping center or subdivision in your township may look suspicious to your residents if discussions are held behind closed doors. That same process undertaken in the light of public scrutiny will help ensure not only the public's buy-in, but their trust that the officials involved did not benefit personally from the decision.

COMMUNICATIONS BASICS

The first step in effective communication is to craft your message. Without a message, there can be no communication. An effective communicator first asks him or herself a few simple questions. What is it you're trying to communicate? Why is this message important? What do you hope to accomplish with a particular communication? Then, you must identify the audiences with which you wish to communicate. Often, certain communications may not be important or appropriate for all of your potential audiences. You must identify each audience and determine its unique needs and wants, as well as the appropriateness of the information to be provided.

Your first audience is, obviously, your constituents. They elected you to do a job and expect you to do it with integrity. But, in terms of communication, what do they want? They have elected you to serve their interests and act as a steward of their money and local resources. They look to you to do what's right always, without thought to your own personal gain.

What do they need? Access to clear, concise information to help them stay informed and engaged as citizens, and open, honest and effective government.

The second public with which you must be concerned is the media. Members of your local media want to view you as a trusted source and resource for information on township happenings. They want truthful, timely responses to their inquiries, and your cooperation and assistance. They need your help in effectively covering your township and tools such as media kits, news releases and other forms of communication to help them generate news.

Communicating with your third audience, established and prospective local businesses, brings another set of wants and needs. Businesses need from you the tools and assistance to help them succeed in your community. They want you and your board to be receptive to the needs of local businesses, and a board that is open and easy with which to work.

Tourists and visitors to your community also have wants and needs. They want to know what makes your township a unique and desirable destination, and to know why they should spend their hard-earned money with your local businesses. And, they need quick, easy access to quality information.

Other audiences may include legislators, local students and township employees, among others. For each audience, you must determine their unique wants and needs to ensure effective communication. No matter what your message, it's important to keep these needs and wants in mind while crafting it.

AVENUES OF COMMUNICATION

Once your audiences have been identified, you must determine the best method or methods for communicating your message. Different audiences may require different and/or multiple messages and methods to ensure reception and retention. For example, to announce an event celebrating the opening of your new township hall, you might send a news release and media kit to the local media, but send direct invitations and place an announcement on your township's Web site and in your newsletter for residents and local business leaders.

Public relations is about building trust and relationships with your audiences, and getting your message to the right people at the right time.

There are a host of communications options open to you, including news releases, media events, news interviews, media kits, newsletters (print and/or electronic), your township Web site, e-mail, snail mail (U.S. Postal Service), letters to the editor, opinion articles in local newspapers, television and radio announcements, phone calls, and good old face-to-face communications, just to name a few.

Each communication method brings with it a list of pros and cons. For example, electronic communications, such as e-mail and Web sites, are fast and easy, but are far less personal than a phone call or face-to-face meeting. However, phone calls and meetings are more time-consuming and require the other party to adjust his or her schedule to receive the message.

When dealing with the media, it's always easier to simply send a press release, but that's a poor way to ensure your release will be used. It's always a good idea to call a reporter or editor to let him or her know the release is coming and offer yourself or other relevant parties as available for follow-up questions or concerns. An unannounced news release is more likely to end up in the trash than on the front page.



How you speak, dress and act all have an impact on your image and reputation.

TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

There are two basic types of communication with all audiences: non-crisis and crisis. Non-crisis communication includes all the various daily, weekly, monthly and yearly communications with reporters, residents, businesses, visitors and others. Crisis communication occurs in an emergency situation, as in a natural disaster, health emergency, terrorist attack, and/or police or other governmental investigation.

Non-Crisis Communication

How you handle communication in a non-crisis is perhaps more important than how you handle crisis communications. Good PR is proactive as well as reactive. Non-crisis communication allows you to build a good reputation at every opportunity. Again, it's important to remember that transparency equals trust in the court of public opinion. Promoting a positive image and managing your reputation in the community can be a big help when disaster



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strikes. When the public believes that you are telling them everything, they're more likely to trust you when the chips are down.

However, non-crisis communication is more than the mundane, everyday communications. One of the most important roles an effective communicator can play is in creating awareness of the good things you're doing. Remember, there are always stories to be told. It's your job to get someone to listen! Provide your audiences with good, solid, honest information.

Crisis Communications

When Vice President Dick Cheney accidentally shot and wounded his friend and hunting companion—Texas lawyer Harry Whittington—while on a quail hunting trip in 2005, his communications staff had a sterling opportunity to quell rumors and innuendo by quickly and accurately telling his side of the story. Instead, his staff waited more than 24 hours to release any information about the incident, allowing unfounded stories to circulate

privately and in the media for far too long. For communications professionals, this kind of breakdown in the basic rules of crisis communications is unconscionable.

You can't stop bad things from happening, but you *can* mitigate the damage and win public support with good communication. If you want to ensure that the public believes that you are properly handling a situation, a crisis communication plan is essential. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all crisis communication plan. You should anticipate the types of crises you may face and come up with a plan for each.

A well-constructed crisis communication plan will help you provide important information to concerned audiences quickly and accurately. An effective plan should define response strategies, assign communications resources and responsibilities, enable you to reach target audiences with key messages, and launch public information and media relations campaigns immediately.

During a crisis, the successful communicator has a number of responsibilities. For example, it's up to the communicator to ensure that the quality of communication does not become a crisis in itself. In other words, make sure you're providing high-quality, honest communications to the best of your ability so that you don't have to backtrack and risk hurting your credibility later on.

It's also important to drive the communications process proactively. During a crisis, the media and your constituents are waiting for you to tell them what's going on. Don't make them come to you. No matter how severe the situation, you can do a lot to relieve the inevitable fear and confusion your residents may feel by simply letting them know what's going on and what you're doing to deal with the problem.

In a crisis situation, it's crucial to maintain tight control over who speaks on behalf of your township. This is not only to keep sensitive information from leaking, but also to ensure that messages are being delivered effectively and that accurate information is being provided. In situations like this, one spokesperson is usually best.

Remember, though, to assign someone from your township as a back-up spokesperson, should the normal spokesperson be incapacitated or unavailable. A good crisis communication plan will create a hierarchy of official spokespersons to ensure that the chain of communication isn't broken.

'No Comment'—The Worst Phrase in the English Language

"No comment." You see it every day in news stories. Someone is always refusing to comment about one situation or another. And it's always a mistake. The public sees a refusal to comment as an admission of guilt. This is where attorneys and public relations professionals often differ. In a crisis, your attorney may counsel you to keep quiet until all the facts are known. That's not necessarily bad advice, as long as it's handled properly. Remember that your township's attorney is concerned mainly with the legal issues facing your township. He or she is not necessarily considering the public relations aspect of the situation.

Instead of saying "no comment," how about admitting that you're still looking into the situation yourself? There is absolutely nothing wrong with admitting that you don't have all the facts. It's perfectly appropriate to answer a reporter's question with, "We're currently investigating that. We'll issue a statement later today (or tomorrow, etc.)." And, once you've made a statement like that, be sure to follow through.

SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

The bottom line is this: Communication is the key to shaping public opinion. Getting your message to the right audiences at the right time will go a long way in making sure your constituents trust you and support the work you're doing on their behalf. If you communicate well and build strong relationships with your audiences, they are much more likely to give you the support you need to effectively represent them.

Remember, honesty and transparency are the most important aspects of communication, and therefore in shaping public opinion. If your reputation is one of integrity, the public will be more likely to give you the benefit of the doubt.

Ryan Knott,
Former MTA Public Affairs Specialist



Candidates in MTA's Township Governance Academy may obtain 2.0 continuing education credits by successfully completing the self-evaluation on page 22.

Continuing Education Self-Assessment



Participants enrolled in the Township Governance Academy (TGA), a credentialing program offered through the Michigan Townships Association, may obtain 2.0 elective credits for successful completion of this quiz. To obtain credit, participants must answer the following 10 multiple-choice questions by circling the correct answer and receive a passing score of 70 percent. The questions are based on content from the article, "The Power of Communication to Shape Public Opinion," beginning on page 16.

There is no charge to take the quiz or to obtain TGA credit. **Completed quizzes should be sent to: MTA Education Center, 512 Westshire Drive, Lansing, MI 48917, or faxed to (517) 321-8908.** MTA will notify you of your results within three weeks after receiving your quiz. *IMPORTANT: Please keep a copy of your completed quiz in your TGA binder.*

Township officials interested in enrolling in the Township Governance Academy may call Shelley Tucker, MTA education specialist, at (517) 321-6467, ext. 251, or for more information, visit the MTA Web site at www.michigantownships.org, and click on the "Education" tab, then "Township Governance Academy."

TGA Continuing Education—April 2007 "The Power of Communication to Shape Public Opinion"

2.0 Elective Credits

(To receive credit, this quiz must be completed by April 1, 2010.)

NAME: _____ TOWNSHIP & COUNTY: _____

ADDRESS: _____ CITY/STATE/ZIP: _____

E-MAIL ADDRESS: _____

1. **To be an effective communicator, which of the following is MOST important:**
 - a. To be a good speaker and listen effectively
 - b. To be a good speaker and write effectively
 - c. To be just as good at listening as writing and speaking
 - d. To listen to all questions and concerns and act immediately upon them
2. **The best way to manage your reputation is:**
 - a. To attend all board meetings
 - b. To act with honesty and integrity in all aspects of public and private life
 - c. To adhere to residents' wishes at all times
 - d. To keep your opinions to yourself
3. **Which of the following is NOT a good listening skill:**
 - a. Maintaining transparency
 - b. Maintaining good eye contact
 - c. Repeat what is being said
 - d. Showing gratitude
4. **During a crisis, it is important to:**
 - a. Wait and ensure you have all the facts before speaking with the media
 - b. Let the media and constituents come to you
 - c. Let the media and constituents know what is going on and how you plan to deal with it
 - d. Assume another board member will take the lead
5. **The MOST important aspects of communication are:**
 - a. Your reputation and integrity
 - b. Your honesty and transparency
 - c. Your relationship with the media and constituents
 - d. Your relationship with fellow board members and the public
6. **Public relations is:**
 - a. Putting a positive spin on a story
 - b. Covering up your mistakes
 - c. Image, reputation and communications management
 - d. Sharing information only when the township has successes
7. **When considering public relations, which of the following statements is most appropriate when responding publicly if you don't have all the facts:**
 - a. No comment
 - b. I'm still looking into that, hopefully I'll have an answer for you by tomorrow
 - c. Can you repeat the question?
 - d. Your guess is as good as mine
8. **Why does public opinion matter to township officials?**
 - a. The public is always right
 - b. The court of public opinion can be more damaging than a court of law
 - c. Public opinion matters most during election time
 - d. It doesn't
9. **When considering the audience, officials should:**
 - a. Keep the message consistent for all audiences
 - b. Tailor information for each audience's wants and needs
 - c. Remember that townships only have one audience: the residents
 - d. Keep most information to themselves
10. **Transparency in township communication:**
 - a. Gives the public more information than they need to know
 - b. Can result in greater buy-in and support from residents
 - c. Is against the law
 - d. Can give the public a false sense of security