

Communications Division Service Delivery Review

Municipality of Clarington

June 2023

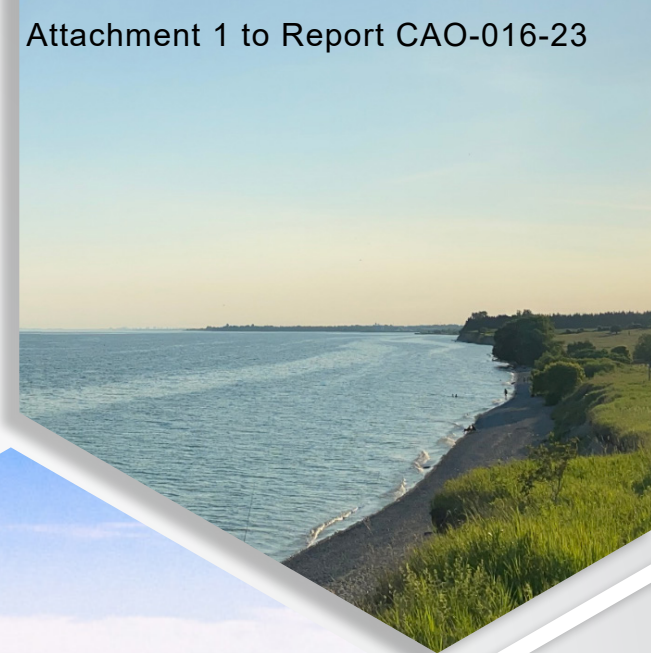


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Introduction and Background

The Municipality of Clarington is one of the province's fastest growing communities. Situated just an hour outside of Toronto, it's not surprising that this region is attractive to newcomers. It offers the best of both worlds – offering big-city amenities and close proximity to major highway routes for commuters and cottagers alike, while also keeping its 'small-municipality' feel, and quiet lifestyle.

As the community grows, so do the expectations from its tax base. There is growing expectation that their governments are responsive beyond the typical 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. working hours, especially as issues arise. More than ever, municipalities need the ability to communicate quickly. The make-up of communities is changing, as new residents expand the diversity of communities. Municipalities need to demonstrate in all they do that they are welcome to all. Residents also demand a stronger voice in decision making. Internally, departments and communications teams are working to keep up. They are finding shifts are needed to set realistic expectations and meet both public demands and legislative requirements.

From a communications perspective, the landscape has changed dramatically over the past several years, and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Two recent public relations research studies^{1,2} speak to the evolving trends and challenges for the future of communications and public relations professionals. Highlights include: the rise of mis- and disinformation because audiences are empowered to publish content online, the decline of journalism, a growing lack of community trust in their governments, and the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, to name a few. Each of these puts pressure on municipal communications teams as they work to inform and engage their communities.

Effective, strategic communications plays a critical role in building public confidence in municipal decision making and service delivery, and an understanding of how municipal governments operate. When done well, communications strengthen trust between a municipality and its constituents.

Expanded efforts to connect with Clarington's 105,000 residents, plus the need to internally engage with Clarington's municipal staff, has put growing pressure on the municipality's communications department. The recent departure of the Municipality's communications manager triggered an opportunity to take a step back and review the organization's communications function and structure before initiating the recruitment process.

The Municipality of Clarington engaged Redbrick Communications to conduct a review of their communications function, team structure and activities to identify opportunities for improvement for a more organized, consistent approach to better meet internal and external needs. This review will also help prepare the organization to meet future needs of a growing community and changing communications landscape.

"The best PR professionals are the conscience of their organizations."

– Daniel Tisch, President and CEO for Argyle Public Relationship, former Chair of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management

¹Looking back - Looking forward: Insights from Communications Leaders into the future of Public Relations, Dr. Terry Flynn, Director Master of Communications Management, McMaster University

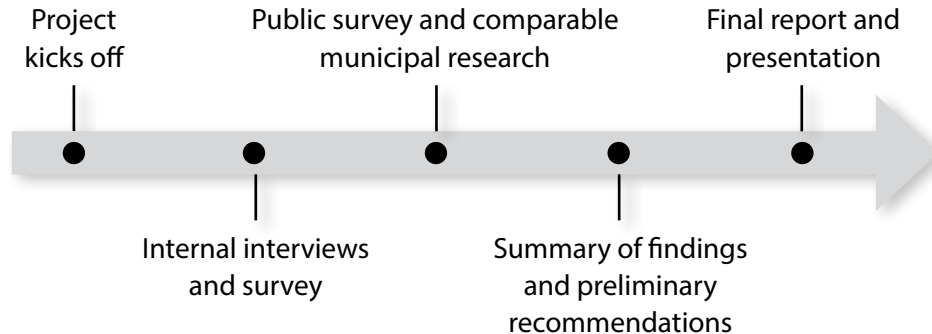
²The Elevation of Public Relations, A discussion paper on a profession's present – and its possible future, Dan Tisch, APR, FCPRS, President and CEO for Argyle Public Relationship and past chair of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management

Project Objectives

As the Municipality grows, there's a need to enhance and build-up communications capacity, while also focusing on overall structure and function. These efforts also need to align with Clarington's strategic plan, currently under development. This review will provide recommendations to help:

- provide insights into the current structure and suggestions for enhancement
- clarify the role and function of the team
- provide insights for future budget, staffing and resource decisions to create a high-functioning communications team
- ensure the organization can meet community needs for years to come.

Scope of Work



Methodology

This review includes analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative includes numbers such as population, digital analytics and survey results. A summary of qualitative feedback includes input obtained from confidential interviews with internal staff and members of council, online survey comments, and best practices from three comparable municipalities.

Here is the breakdown of the research conducted:

- ✓ A full review of communications materials, supporting documents and council reports provided by the Municipality
- ✓ Ongoing discussions with the project leads
- ✓ Internal survey (112 respondents)
- ✓ Interview with the CAO and the Manager of Corporate Performance
- ✓ Individual interviews with communications staff
- ✓ Meetings with individual councillors and mayor
- ✓ Six interviews with Department Heads and managers
- ✓ Public survey (124 respondents)
- ✓ Three meetings with local media
- ✓ Meetings and analysis of two comparable municipalities (City of Pickering, Town of Milton)
- ✓ Interviews with two communications consultants (former recent municipal communications directors for the City of Richmond Hill and East Gwillimbury; City of Mississauga)
- ✓ Findings from a 2021 review of several municipal communications division structures
- ✓ Best practices derived from 35 in-depth interviews with municipal communications leads in the past four years alone
- ✓ Findings from two recent communications and public relations research studies, and presentations by their authors at the June 2023 Canadian Public Relations Conference
- ✓ Redbrick Communications' 20-year history and expertise working in the municipal sector

Key Themes: What We Heard

Mayor and Council

Overarching themes:

- Council feels well supported by communications, and well-prepared for meetings, public-facing events, and media moments.
- There is an understanding that the communications department lacks resources, and Council is supportive of the team growing and also supportive of trying new methods of communications.
- Council would find value in reports that show the workload and/or achievements of the department. These reports would help council understand the “why” of communications and how their work brings values to the Municipality and Council priorities.
- Council perceives that the public wants to be better engaged on municipal “hot topics” like development, roads projects and council decisions.
- Council is unsure if external communications is effectively reaching all audiences.

Summary of feedback heard:

Clarington’s Mayor and councillors all expressed a genuine appreciation of communications staff. They reported that the working relationship between council and staff has improved significantly over the last six months. There’s a general feeling that communications staff do a great job of supporting council with information and assistance when the need arises.

They recognize that since COVID-19, public expectations for communications and hybrid meetings has put a lot of pressure on municipal staff. With an expectation from residents for enhanced, broader communications, Council recognizes additional resources

may be required within the department, along with more defined staff roles and responsibilities. Council doesn’t currently receive consistent reports from the department. Regular reports would help Council members better understand the workload, current projects, and achievements of the communications department and how they support initiatives across the organization.

Council expressed the importance of providing a mix of print and digital communications, like Clarington’s quarterly newsletter. However, there are mixed opinions about what medium is most effective and the best use of taxpayers’ dollars. There’s concern the senior demographic is being missed with so much emphasis on digital media. Currently, there’s not enough data or analytics to know. There’s also a concern that print media isn’t being used to its full capacity. Proactively reaching out to more national publications about Clarington’s good news stories may be helpful.

In terms of their own communications, some of the councillors noted they aren’t active on social media, but recognize that discussions, comments and concerns about municipal decisions and initiatives often happen online. They report wanting to have more awareness about online discussions, the pulse of the community and to be kept informed if there are opportunities for them to follow up with constituents to help correct misinformation or help residents better understand the decision-making process. They want to ensure the community feels connected to its Council and look to communications to help bridge that gap where possible, especially online, to mitigate any perceptions where residents may feel their councillors are not responsive.

Ideas for improvement:

- Better analytics and data to understand which forms of communications have the greatest impact.
- Regular, detailed reports coming from the communications department to Council that include measurable results and demonstrate how the department is working towards achieving the council approved vision, goals, and priorities that will shape the Municipality's Strategic Plan.
- More real-time coverage of community events where council is present to share on social media.
- Increased ability for councillors to respond and communicate quickly with their constituents - support for them to post on their own social media channels.
- Enhanced public participation and engagement on municipal decision-making.
- Humanize stories. Celebrate the success of the Municipality through the people who live here. Celebrate the voices and the people in the community.
- Tell the good news stories of people who work at Clarington.
- Use local and national media more often. Send press releases and photos. Develop new relationships with journalists outside of the region for bigger stories.

Staff

The CAO at the Municipality of Clarington is committed to continuous improvement and modernization. Through this service delivery review, key goals include ensuring a more proactive and strategic approach to communications, clear roles and responsibilities, better standards that tie with customer service goals, consistency of brand and messaging and stronger story telling.

They see the role of communications as taking a lead to bring the organization together and working collaboratively with departments, protecting and promoting a strong brand identity for the Municipality, ensuring the community is informed and has access

to timely and consistent information on many different platforms, taking a proactive approach to issues management, and working with departments to ensure the community has a voice. Staff across the organization recognize that the Municipality's communications team works hard and is pulled in a number of directions. However, because they are unaware of the team's priorities and workload, currently, there is uncertainty in a number of areas:

- What the team's priorities are
- What is within their scope of work
- How they are best engaged and brought into a project
- Expectations for timelines
- The roles and responsibilities between communications and departments

From an internal communications perspective, both the interviews and the survey results showed that staff take pride in the work they do everyday. They want to feel more engaged and involved in their organization and feel valued for their contributions.

As the Municipality has changed and evolved over the past several months, staff feel somewhat disconnected from the broader team and other departments. They are looking for a stronger sense of one team and one Municipality, and to work collaboratively with others.

Finally, staff feedback points to the need for greater community engagement and two-way conversation with those they serve. They are unsure where this role lies, but feel communications likely plays a part.

Overarching themes:

- Communications is reactive, rather than proactive. Information is not always sent in a timely manner, especially in response to issues. There is a feeling of often needing to "catch up".
- Department is under-resourced. Roles aren't clearly defined.

- Work is assigned based on capacity rather than skillset or department subject understanding.
- Department leaders would like more planned communications to work ahead with the team to potentially develop annual plans or to improve strategic communications planning tied to their business goals so they can be more proactive and tell a stronger story.
- Departments work in silos. As a result, they are unaware of workload and priorities that the communications team faces. They would like a regular and clearer picture of communications projects and plans.
- Staff from both the departments and communications feel that the pressures of day-to-day work does not currently allow for more in-depth storytelling or campaigns that take more time to plan and execute. They both desire stronger processes and policies to help address these challenges and make communications activities more efficient.
- Staff want stronger internal communications. They want to be informed and engaged. Currently, internal communications is not seen as a focus, and staff who work in the field or do not have easy online access do not feel connected nor informed.
- Website needs improvement to complement external communications efforts.

General feedback from what we heard:

We interviewed staff from both communications and other Municipal departments. The opportunities and challenges identified generally aligned. Each recognize the need for better processes and functions, clearer understanding of the roles each play and a desire to be more proactive and timely in reaching both internal and external audiences.

Communications is the department that staff feel works closest with the Clarington community. Their role includes the development of messaging, overseeing the Municipality's brand, and telling stories in a way that's clear, concise and timely.

Internally, across the organization, there is a feeling that teams are working in silos. Staff feel segregated from each other. Since the structural reorganization in 2019, there's a general feeling that many staff at Clarington don't really know one another and want a culture that is more collaborative and connected.

Staff also want to feel engaged and included internally, but don't always feel like they're receiving enough information, and tend to hear about internal corporate decisions "through the grapevine." This impacts morale, especially for frontline staff who engage with the public on a daily basis.

Departments engage the communications department in different ways – some by phone, some in person, some by email and some using the online portal form. As indicated earlier, they are unaware of the demands put on communications staff. They recognize that communications is under-resourced, but don't have a clear indication of what staff are working on outside of their own requests.

Departments want to be helpful in ensuring the Municipality communicates effectively. They understand they have a role to play in effective communications and want to be more proactive and engage communications earlier in their initiatives. Some departments would also like to be trusted with developing and managing some of their own day-to-day content for social channels.

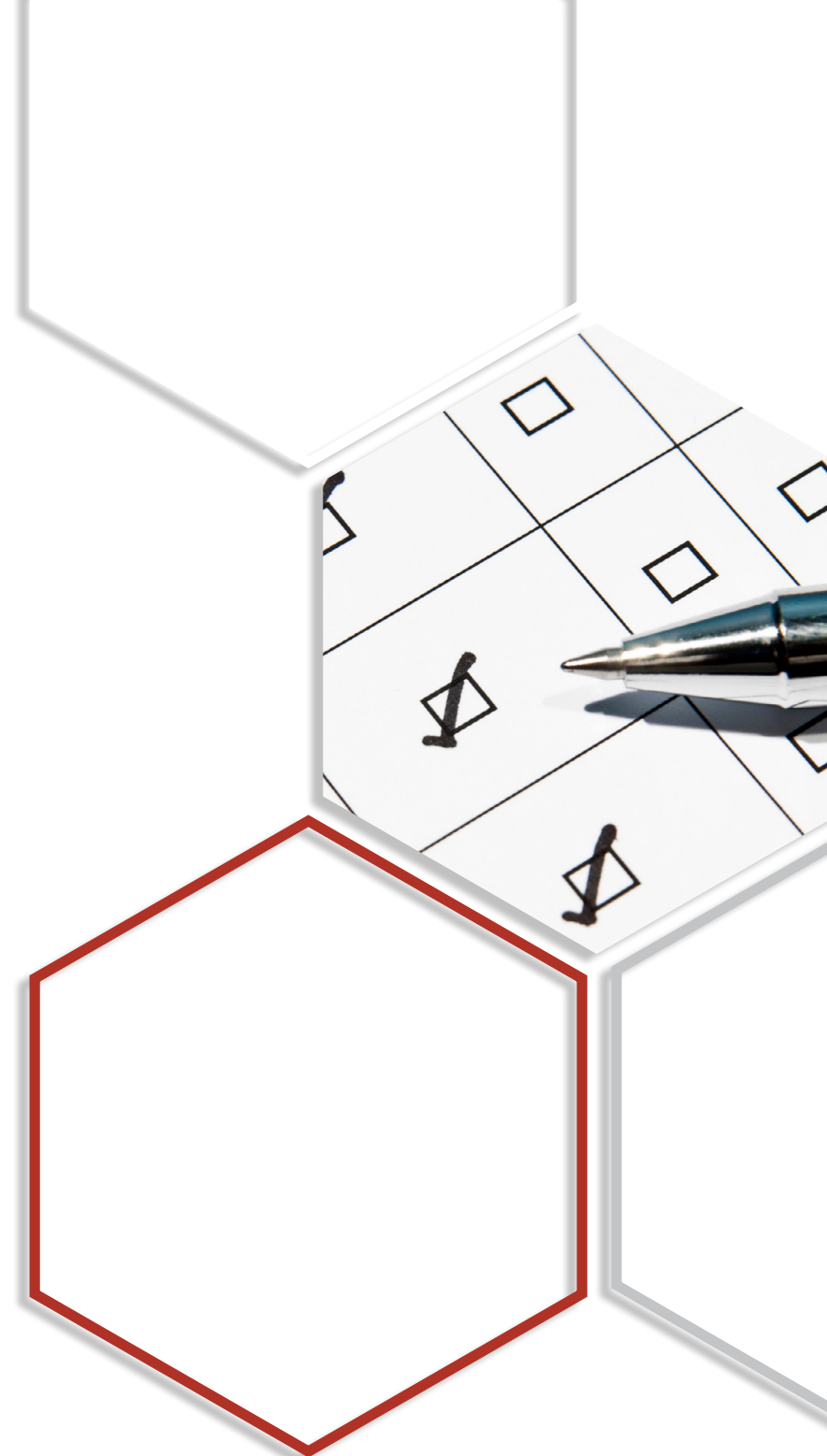
From a communications perspective, the team desires more consistency in process and engagement. They want one way they are engaged for easier tracking and reporting, higher standards met with the information shared with them at the outset, consistent ways to collaborate, share feedback and manage approvals and to close the loop when work is complete.

A consistent theme for improving external communications was improving the Municipality's website. As a central tool for sharing information staff across the organization feel the site is difficult to navigate and reported regularly having difficulty finding information. As well, more clarity and guidance is needed for roles and responsibility in writing content and posting to the website, and greater oversight for quality and meeting best practice web standards and legislated accessibility requirements.

As an overarching theme, staff recognize that Clarington would benefit from a stronger corporate direction for communications.

Suggestions for improvement provided by staff in the comments section of the survey:

- Ensure all staff from all departments are kept better and more consistently informed and engaged.
- Develop an internal communications strategy and make better use of The Hub and email blasts.
- Offer more ways for staff to network, get to know one another, and collaborate to create a stronger sense of team and improve overall staff morale.
- Build stronger collaboration between departments and communications to help strengthen a more proactive approach.
- Implement a way to better plan for annual communications (e.g., holidays, municipal events, recreational programming)
- Create a process to help the Municipality tell the good news stories and achievements of the corporation, its staff and departments.
- Engage staff from other departments and bring them in on projects when appropriate.
- Staff shared several ideas for storytelling or campaigns, such as:
 - » how Clarington is addressing rapid growth, new trails, parks, and overall community improvements etc.
 - » Acts of kindness, stories that show a strong sense of community



➤ Survey Results

The staff survey highlighted similar key themes to what we heard in the interviews. Data also amplified how staff are currently receiving information and where there are opportunities for improvement.

Key themes included:

- more proactive issues management and responding more quickly and effectively
- staff across the organization wanting to be better informed
- more consistency with the Municipality's brand and messaging
- strengthened public engagement

Internal Survey Highlights

Number of respondents: 112

Top three ways staff get most of their information about what's happening at the municipality.



67%

"word of mouth"



64%

learn from a manager or supervisor



60%

get their information from all-staff emails.

41%

of employees feel strongly that they are informed about municipal information and updates.



27%

said they do not feel well informed.

85%

of respondents said they want they feel their work is important, and they want to feel engaged in their work.



68%

said they do not feel they get to be involved in decision making.

42%

of respondents said they don't feel residents receive enough information or correspondence from the municipality.



46%

of respondents do not feel residents understand what their department does.

Commentary: Word of mouth and information from managers and supervisors are the top ways staff receive information. This opens a risk to inconsistency and potential misinformation. All-staff emails are relatively effective and could be leveraged more. More than half the staff feel they are somewhat informed or not well informed. The Municipality needs a stronger vision and processes to ensure staff get the information they need and feel engaged where they work.

In terms of external communication:

80%

of respondents feel the municipality's main line of communication is social media.



60%

said phone or email.

37%

of staff feel the municipality's brand is strong.



30%

said Clarington's social media presence is strong.

63%

said Clarington's social media presence is strong.



There are several audiences being missed with external communications efforts. The top three are:



seniors



newcomers to Clarington



people with limited and/or rural internet access

The top three priorities for better overall communications are:

- Better internal communication with staff
- More meaningful public engagement
- Improved, more proactive issues management (getting on top of things sooner.)

Commentary: Staff feel that the public is generally not aware of all the Municipality does for its community. Social media is an effective tool, but could be used more better. There is also a sense that the Municipality's brand should be strengthened.

Staff are important communicators on behalf of the organization and could be better leveraged to share information and be champions when they are engaging with residents. Staff desire more information and want to help the Municipality strengthen its connection with the community.

External Survey Highlights

As we often find in external surveys, residents are most interested in the topics and information that effect their local quality of life or that are highly visible to them on a regular basis: events and programs, roads and construction, development etc.

Different from what we saw from the internal survey, only 29% of residents who responded rank social media as one of the top ways they receive information about the Municipality. Most used Facebook (86%), however 53% of respondents said they don't follow the Municipality on social media, and 25% said they get their information from channels not run by Clarington. These statistics create a risk that the community may not be getting factual information and that others' content is more engaging and interesting.

The website and local media coverage ranked much higher than social media and will need to be considered going forward to better reach the community. Generally, residents who responded say information on the website is somewhat easy to find, but as we heard from staff, there are opportunities to make it better.

In terms of public engagement, 33% said they feel the Municipality is effective in providing opportunities for the community to give input into local programs, services and decisions. 42% were neutral. However, most who responded (59%) said typically participate if asked. 36% said they would sometimes participate. 96% feel it is important to provide input and be engaged by the Municipality.

When interpreting these statistics, it's important to remember that the feedback is coming from more engaged individuals who are likely to complete these surveys. An online survey such as this is only one way to gather input. It may not have reached a broad audience, nor those who prefer other methods of engagement.

Number of respondents: 124

- Respondents were almost equally long-term residents (more than 15 years spend living in Clarington) and newcomers (less than 15 years.)
- 52% of those surveyed said they currently feel they are receiving too little information and communications from the municipality.
- The top five topics residents want to hear about are:
 - » Events run by the municipality (82%)
 - » Municipal programs and services (82%)
 - » Updates on roads projects (78%)
 - » Emergency updates (73%)
 - » Updates on building projects and new development (72%)
- In terms of staying informed about these topics, the survey shows the top three ways residents most often receive their information are from:
 - » The municipal website (55%)
 - » Reading or listening to local media coverage (49%)
 - » Social media pages operated by the municipality (29%)
- People were asked to identify which media outlets they read, view or listen to most frequently. The top answers were:
 - » Clarington This Week (35%)
 - » Durhamregion.com (19%)
 - » KX96 or 94.9 The Rock or CKDO Durham's Classic Hits (19%)
 - » Additionally, 19% of respondents said they do not pay attention to local media.
- 87% of those surveyed said they visit the Clarington.net website. Of those, 64% said they visit monthly.

- In terms of website accessibility:
 - » 64% said information is sometimes easy to find
 - » 13% said information is always easy to find
 - » 23% said information is NOT easy to find
- 86% of respondents indicated they have a Facebook account, but only 41% of those people are following Clarington's Facebook page. 53% indicated they don't follow any of Clarington's social media accounts.
- 87% of respondents said if they have an issue they directly call or email the municipality.
- In terms of public engagement:
 - » 59% said when offered, they participate in public input.
 - » 36% said they sometimes do.
 - » 5% said they never do.
 - » 97% of respondents said it's important to them to be engaged by the municipality on decision-making matters.



Local Media

Overarching themes:

- Local media resources are shrinking. The work coming from the communications department is very helpful.
- Communications materials are well-written, concise, and in the proper format with high quality photos.
- As newsrooms continue to shrink, they rely on municipalities to share their own news.

As local newsrooms continue to lose staff, municipal communications departments have to take a greater role in becoming their own style of newsroom. This means knowing deadlines and sending timely information to local media outlets, and having their eyes and ears out in the community for stories that have a municipal angle.

Local media has a great rapport with Clarington, recognizing that staff make a conscious effort to include them in email blasts and sending news releases.

Suggestions for improvement:

- Be aware of deadlines.
- Ensure councillors and staff are returning interview requests.
- Notify local media outlets when they've made mistakes or factual errors. It's appreciated and helps them ensure they're doing a good job.
- Share video for use on web-based media publications.

Comparable municipalities

Municipal communicators across the province face similar challenges in their communities. Although structures may vary, their organizations often deliver like services; they share similar values of accountability and transparency with their communities; and, they strive to provide timely information. Each looks to demonstrate value for taxpayer dollars and to continually find new ways to broaden their reach and engage more residents and stakeholders in their local government.

Therefore, an important part of any communications review process is to look to how other comparable municipalities structure their communications function, what processes they have in place within the organization to run efficiently, what practices and tactics have been successful in reaching audiences, where they may have adjusted or invested in the past few years and what they are doing now to plan ahead to better meet community needs.

For the Municipality, Redbrick identified three comparable municipalities to reach out to based on a few factors:

- Population size
- Similar challenges related to growth
- Representation in Ontario's Big City Mayors
- Recent focus on enhancing the corporate communications function

Interviews were conducted with the City of Pickering and the Town of Milton. We have identified the City of Kitchener as a third municipality. However, we faced problems with scheduling and competing priorities and were not able to connect in time for this report.

In addition, Redbrick conducted brief interviews with two communications consultants who have been recent municipal communications directors. One was a communications director for the City of Richmond Hill, and then the Town of East Gwillimbury. The other was the former communications director at the City of Mississauga. These interviews focused on workload assignments within their structures and the considerations for their chosen models.

Further, over the past four years, Redbrick has conducted nine communications review projects, varying in scope. Each has included interviews with municipal leaders across Ontario and a few from four other provinces. As a result, Redbrick has recent data and insights from more than 35 municipalities.

Redbrick also pulled insights gleaned from the agency's connection with network of hundreds of municipal communications leaders, and our 20 years' work with and for municipal governments and the associations that support them, such as the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Rural Ontario Municipal Association, the Municipal Finance Officers' Association, to name a few.

Lessons learned by others and their best practices help inform the recommendations for the Municipality of Clarington.

Pickering

Following a communications review conducted by Redbrick in 2019, then updated with current data in 2021, the Municipality has placed more emphasis on improved strategic communications. They created a new Division Head of Public Affairs, Communications, Customer Care, DEI, Mayor/Council, with a seat at the most senior table. They also created a new supervisor position in communications to provide more strategic oversight and support the division head. They are looking to add two additional communications roles in the coming years and to strengthen the relationship between communications and customer service, recognizing the synergies between the two.

Work comes into the department through email and/or in follow up to senior or department meetings. The Division Head leads high-profile and sensitive files. The supervisor has the most face-to-face connection with department clients, and then assigns work to the other staff who work mostly on a portfolio model.

They are putting more effort on improving public engagement. They have launched Let's Talk Pickering (Bang the Table) and offering more pop-up opportunities to hear from the community at events they attend. There is no current corporate framework in place. Planning leads most engagement with support from communications.

Social media continues to be the more effective tool to reach the community. However, there is concern that seniors may be missed. The Municipality is looking to survey the public to better understand what other tools they could leverage more to reach a broader audience.

The team's relationships with local media are good. Key spokespeople are the CAO, mayor and directors, who can assign others to speak as appropriate. They are planning upcoming media training to strengthen media responses.

The Municipality is also developing its first ever strategic plan, which they anticipate will help strengthen the strategic value communications can bring and ensure their work aligns with corporate priorities.

They have put focused effort on preparing the community for growth and have been recognized for their approach. They are leveraging more video than ever before, and having some challenges keeping up with demand.

Their greatest challenge is bandwidth. However, with the shift to having a Division Head role, they are seeing increased support from the CAO and stronger trust with department leaders.



Milton

Milton's communications structure has evolved over time. The director has worked over the past few years to educate departments on the role of communications and the value the team should be bringing to the organization. There has been significant focus to tie all communications work to business objectives and to be less tactical. They are seeing these conversations and relationships paying off. Leaders look to the director and manager for strategic advice and counsel, and are approaching the team less from a tactical standpoint.

They have an online intake form for projects. They use Monday.com to manage, track and report on workload and projects. They use Monday to map out annual campaigns and assign work, so all team members know what's coming and can plan ahead. They have agreed-upon Day of Recognition that are also mapped out. Each corporate strategic project has its own board and is tracked and managed accordingly.

The manager reviews all incoming requests and assigns projects to advisors or to the web coordinator. They have a set standard that departments will get a response within two business days and know who their project lead will be.

They develop annual plans with departments, understand their business needs and meet regularly to stay on track. In some cases, such as with the Fire Department and Economic Development, they have three and five-year plans in place. This allows them to plan ahead, assign resources and have an agreed-upon road map to guide work.

Growth is a significant concern for the community, especially those who are long-time residents. The team is working on building a stronger growth story for the Town and listening to the community to set the stage for development and help show what the Municipality will look like over the coming 10 to 20 years.



Summary of insights from municipal communications leaders and Redbrick's 20 years' expertise

Redbrick is unique in how we are embedded in Ontario's municipal community. We support municipal communications managers, CAOs and elected officials and are committed to helping them share best practices. We regularly provide free resources and guides, and bring them together to share experiences, such as when we offered four municipal communications panel discussions during the early stages of the pandemic.

As well, for the past 15 years, Redbrick's president has chaired the *Summers Direct Municipal Communications Conference* – Canada's largest national conference for municipal communicators.

Further, over the past four years alone, Redbrick has held in-depth interviews with 35 municipal communications leaders to understand how they operate, structure their teams and lessons they have learned along the way.

In addition to our regular client work, Redbrick maintains a Municipal Communicators Network of more than 400 communications managers from across Ontario and the rest of Canada. We use this network to share lessons learned, and to help municipal governments solve problems.

Redbrick's clients benefit from our 'pay-it-forward' approach to assisting communications managers in need. We have a reputation for being helpful, and when we reach out in search for best practices, ideas and solutions, municipal communications managers are quick to share their insights with us. This has proven helpful in many past projects.

Below are best practice highlights based on our past projects, engagements and experience.

Municipal Communications Investments

Over the past five years, municipal communications leaders tell us they are putting more investment and focus in three main areas:

1. Digital storytelling and transformation
2. Public engagement
3. Customer service alignment

They are taking different approaches to strengthen these areas and respond to growing needs, expectations and adapt to new trends.

For example:

- planning and building more capacity in these areas, such as creating new roles for public engagement leads or new community engagement divisions (e.g., City of Guelph).
- restructuring the current communications division scope to include customer service (e.g., City of Kingston, Halton Region).
- strengthening skillsets of existing staff through training and certification (such as with the International Association of Public Participation - IAP2)
- strengthening linkages and collaboration processes between communications and departments who have staff who manage social changes, regularly engage the public or offer customer service
- A combination of the above

Enhancing strategic value

The McMaster research study mentioned in the introduction shows that communications professionals continue to struggle with demonstrating the strategic value they can bring to the organization. It is common for Redbrick to hear from communications staff comments such as, “everyone thinks they are a communicator” or “departments think we only do social media and website.” Developing a communications mindset or culture within an organization takes time and is created by building strong, trusted relationships between communications and department leaders, and by showing successes along the way.

High functioning communications team have established these relationships and have been able to institute the following:

- Focus is on strategy first, then tactics. When departments engage communications, the first questions from communications are, “What is the problem to be solved?” and “What goals are you trying to achieve?” They then work collaboratively to build a strategy to achieve identified results.
 - They have a seat at the most senior tables, and all initiatives tie back to the organization’s mission, vision and values. Communications is part of strategic discussions, is kept abreast of latest developments and challenges and can more quickly and easily flag brewing issues or provide strategic advice for response.
 - Clear processes and planning tools are in place, understood and followed across the organization.
 - They function like a newsroom and tell simple, concrete stories from start to finish.
 - Tools and tactics are audience focused and targeted on outcomes.
 - Social media is used strategically, with a plan and purpose for each channel.
- A strong connection between communications and customer service means two-way sharing, consistency of messaging and early issues mitigation.
 - Communications supports public engagement and work with departments to offer a variety of engagement opportunities to reach a broad range of voices, or there is a dedicated public engagement lead in place.



Tools

More and more municipal communications teams are strengthening project tracking and adopting the use of technology to support monitoring and reporting and public engagement.

Function	Most commonly used	Commentary
Social media management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media management 	<p>Post and monitor all channels through one platform. Assign tasks to team members. Easy to schedule ahead. Strong analytic and reporting capabilities to track progress. Varying access to reporting tools depending on subscription type. Simple password management.</p>
Graphic design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canva (free or paid) • Adobe Creative Suite 	<p>Canva is the most user friendly and cost effective. Paid Canva accounts offer a wider range of valuable templates and images. Adobe Creative Suite is robust and expensive but is the tool of choice for graphic designers to create the highest quality collateral. Formal training is recommended.</p>
Photography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pixabay (free) • iStock photo (paid) • Hiring a photographer to take seasonal local photos • Ensuring communications and department staff have the tools and knowledge to take strong local photos 	<p>Visual and video content is far better remembered and has a greater reach than written copy, especially on social media.</p> <p>Pixabay offers many photos, but may not be at the same quality, nor have the same variety as paid content from iStock.</p> <p>Telling a local story visually is increasingly more important to build trust and connection with the community. Municipalities are investing in building up local photo libraries from which to draw images. This may include equipping communications staff with a smartphone and/or camera. When possible, it is preferable to use original visual content over stock images.</p>

Function	Most commonly used	Commentary
Public engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bang the Table Engagement HQ 	<p>Bang the Table has penetrated the municipal landscape across the country to enhance online public engagement and two-way connection with communities and government.</p> <p>Participants need to register to participate and resources are needed to promote the tool, keep it current and active, and continually increase visibility and participation rates.</p> <p>Online engagement platforms should be supplemented with other opportunities for input.</p>
Project management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday.com Trello Microsoft Project Customized portals 	<p>Can be used to track workload, resources and timelines, but may be too tactically focused.</p> <p>Offers reports for tracking and raising awareness of workloads to senior leaders and to guide discussions about priorities.</p> <p>Can be used to improve collaborative, proactive planning with departments.</p>
<p>Video creation (there are many other tools available. These are common ones)</p> <p>Equipment needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good Smartphone or DLSR camera Tripod Lighting Audio mike Smartphone stabilizer 	<p>Whiteboard video animation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doodly VideoScribe <p>Editing Software</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adobe Premier Pro Camtasia <p>Create/edit videos on Smartphone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adobe Clip iMovie (iPhone) Boomerang <p>Royalty-free music</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audiojungle.net PremiumBeat Shutterstock Audionetwork.net 	<p>As video has become more prominent, so have the tools available to create them.</p> <p>More communicators are able to use their Smartphones effectively to create quick videos for use on social media. They are effective and staff should know how to use these to communicate quickly.</p> <p>More sophisticated video software and tools are available, as the organization matures related to video creation.</p>

Processes, policies and workflow

Municipalities with established processes and policies report the following:

- ✓ Clear understanding of roles and responsibilities
- ✓ Improved efficiency with greater understanding of expectations and timelines
- ✓ Proactive planning and response
- ✓ Higher trust and collaboration with department staff

Workflow tool	Related communications function
Common policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media relations • Social media - corporate use and personal use by municipal staff (sometimes for Council) • Advertising and promotional items • AODA (not always overseen by communications) • Use of photos • Election-related communications policies or rules
Communications guides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Branding and logo guidelines • Writing for the Web guide • Style guides and plain language • Graphic design and photo use • Public engagement framework
Processes/standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project intake with response standards • Timelines for common tactics • Issues management
Tools and templates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications planning template • Public engagement toolkit • Issues management brief • Photo and video release forms • Templates for social media posts, presentations, flyers, etc.

Trends for the future of communications and public relations

Recent communications and public relations research^{3,4} provide important insights into the challenges, opportunities and trends related to the profession. As Clarington considers the way forward, it is important to consider this rapidly changing landscape.

➤ Top 5 areas of concern

1. Staff turnover and burnout
2. Lack of advancement opportunities
3. Communications perceived as a “soft service” by senior leaders
4. Ongoing changes in the media landscape
5. Digital overload, misinformation and disinformation

➤ Key opportunities for the profession

1. Internal engagement and connection
2. Bringing strengthened strategic value during times of issues and crisis
3. Becoming a more inclusive and diverse profession
4. Digital transformation

➤ Megatrends for public relations



Higher stakes and rising value of reputation



Empowered audiences



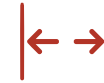
Content shock and disinformation



Many speak, few listen



Decline of journalism



A gap in wealth and trust



AI comes to PR

³Looking back - Looking forward: Insights from Communications Leaders into the future of Public Relations, Dr. Terry Flynn, Director Master of Communications Management, McMaster University

⁴The Elevation of Public Relations, A discussion paper on a profession's present – and its possible future, Dan Tisch, APR, FCPRS, President and CEO for Argyle Public Relationship and past chair of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management

➤ **What these mean for communications leaders**

Focus on relationships and community building

Play a central role to define and demonstrate the organization's character, values and purpose at senior table

Earn trust through inclusive listening

Leverage data on publics, attitudes and behaviours

Align communication planning with strategy and purpose

Become organizational storytellers

As communicators look forward, the importance of building trusted relationships both inside their organizations and with their key publics is more critical than ever. This is a strength of communications professionals. They need to take the lead in community building and play a more central role in being an advisor with senior leaders by leveraging their broader view of the organization as a whole and how key audiences perceive it, and align their work with the municipality's priorities.

Communicators need to be better listeners and to rely on both their gut and data to influence, persuade and inform, and be able to tell stronger, more engaging stories to combat misinformation and engage communities in the value the organization brings to the people they serve.

"The Chief Communication Officer provides 'horizontality' to strategy development, much like the CEO. Other C-suite members have a vertical perspective."

– Terry Flynn, Director Master of Communications Management, McMaster University

Clarington – Current Communications Context with Observations

As we look at strengthening and enhancing communications for the Municipality of Clarington, it's important to understand the current context: its community, key issues and external considerations. Each of these inform recommendations about what the communications department needs in order to bring the greatest value to the corporation and Clarington's citizens.

Population and Community

Since 2011, the municipality has grown significantly. According to census data, Clarington had a population of just over 84,500 in 2011, which now sits around 105,000. The municipality is expected to grow by 45,000 over the next 15 years. It is also expected that increased immigration will attract more cultural diversity. This growth and change in community fabric will continue to put more demands on the municipality as a whole, and in particular, the communications department.

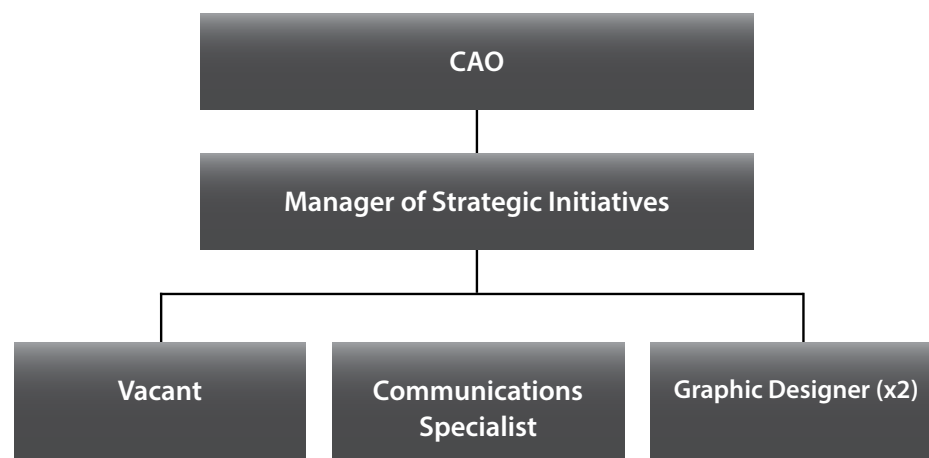
It's becoming increasingly important for the municipality to engage with the local community, especially as it relates to programs, services and managing growth and development. It is important that the municipality tells the story of well-managed, progressive growth, and puts emphasis on community engagement for municipal initiatives.

Clarington's community wants to be involved, and have its say on programs, services and initiatives that directly impact residents. Residents also want real-time communication, and proactive communications related to events, emergencies and service disruptions.

Current Communications Structure and Function

Currently the Municipality's communications function sits within the office of the Chief Administrative Officer. With a new CAO joining the municipality in 2022, and the election of a new council, there is renewed interest in improving communications and supporting the department with additional resources. Additionally, there's been a push for the corporation to have a stronger brand presence.

A structural reorganization in 2019 resulted in tourism moving out of the general communications department. Another recent structural change resulted in a communications staff member being relocated to the Mayor's office. Since this time, the department has been operating without a manager, and with a smaller staff compliment. The Manager of Strategic Initiatives provides oversight and support. The Communications Specialist oversees incoming requests and project manages workflow. However, there is no established senior communications role to provide strategic direction and counsel.



Redbrick conducted a recent municipal structure review gathering data from a cross-section of Ontario municipalities ranging in population size from 50,000 to 180,000. Communications leaders provided a breakdown of their full-time equivalent complements, their portfolios and reporting structures.

For the size of the municipality, Clarington’s staff complement is smaller than that of like-sized municipalities. On average, surrounding municipalities with comparable populations have between three to five more communications staff. Some examples are listed in the chart below. More detailed organizational structure charts have been shared with internal staff at Clarington.

Municipality	Population	No. of Comms Staff
Kingston*	180,000	15 full-time
Guelph	150,000	11 full-time + recruiting one contract
Whitby	150,000	7 full-time
Milton	142,000	7 full-time plus 1 contract
St. Catharines	133,113	7 full-time
Pickering	105,000	4 full-time, plus 1 part-time for web
Waterloo*	104,896	8 full-time
Brantford*	98,000	8 full-time plus 1 part-time
Newmarket*	91,000	7 full-time plus 1 contract
Caledon	82,000	7 full-time
Kawartha Lakes	75,000	4 full-time

* Data is from 2021

Clarington also has an added challenge with two of its communications staff being unionized. This limits their ability to have access to confidential information in the event of high profile, sensitive municipal issues (HR or labour disputes, for example) for which the department may need to communicate both internally and externally. Municipalities with communications staff in unionized positions are sometimes required to engaged third-party support to manage these issues effectively.

All of these circumstances have led to a communications department that is currently under-resourced and becoming overwhelmed. Roles and responsibilities are unclear. Council is not aware of the efforts or outcomes of communications activities. The staff compliment is missing more senior positions to provide strategic advice and oversight, and to mitigate and effectively manage issues. At present, projects that come into the department are assigned based on staff capacity, and other departments are not aware how busy communications staff are, whether there are processes and protocols they should follow to engage communications.

A more organized, strategic and well-resourced team, with better-defined staff roles, will go a long way in addressing current challenges and elevating the value the team can bring to the organization as a whole.

Communications Landscape

Expectations on municipal governments to have exceptional communication with the public has grown significantly since COVID-19. At the same time, trust in local governments has wavered, and the local media landscape has shrunk. Social media and other forms of digital communication have grown as important and dominant channels to inform and engage the community, and residents expect real-time updates, hybrid meeting formats, and a continuation of print-format communications. As result, communications teams need to be their own newsrooms and have strong processes in place to communicate quickly and proactively.

Communities expect to be kept well informed about local programs, services and decisions, and to be effectively consulted along the way. For many municipalities, communications teams are finding it challenging to keep up.

Media Landscape

Clarington has several media publications in the region that offer print and online publications. Those publications have been around for quite some time and know their audiences well. They also have great rapport with the municipality. Although they have limited staff reporters, they've been able to allocate resources to cover council meetings, important community events, and are willing to publish municipal news releases and photos without issue. Even with this media support, it is important that the Municipality functions as its own newsroom and is able to tell a strong story from start to finish. There's an identified gap in the Municipality's communications where good news stories are concerned, and a need for more proactive outreach to media outlets.

Issues Management

With an increased presence in the digital world, comes increased issues management challenges. What may have been an innocuous situation a decade ago - handled relatively quickly and efficiently - now has the potential to balloon into a much larger problem online. Word spreads fast. Digital video, photos and social media gossip spreads even faster.

While many organizations are still figuring out their approach and approving messaging, media have already picked up the story and their audiences are consuming content. The public also has increased expectations related to response and engagement.

In high-functioning municipalities, a collaborative, trusted relationship between communications and senior leaders is paramount to successful issues management. Because communications are engaging daily with key audiences and stakeholders and have the tools in place to identify issues early, they are best positioned to give sound advice and craft messaging that works.

Currently, in Clarington, the manager of strategic initiatives sits at the most senior table, provides strategic advice and supports work related to communications and issues management. However, given his portfolio, he has limited capacity to be proactive. The Municipality would benefit greatly from having a consistent communications lens available to listen, flag and proactively respond to brewing issues.

Public Engagement

Clarington's residents expressed a desire to be more involved in municipal decision-making processes, and the ways in which the community expects to be informed and engaged have broadened. Municipalities have always held the responsibility of informing the public about how taxpayer dollars are spent, and have had to make decisions publicly, with very limited criteria allowing councils to make decisions in closed-session meetings.

For decades, public engagement has meant some open house public meetings, occasional surveys and the offer that members of the community can delegate at council meetings or send in mailed responses. While these methods may still be relevant, they are no longer sufficient. Now the onus is on municipal staff to inform and include the public in a variety of ways, and public engagement has become a significant area of focus for municipalities.

In Clarington, enhancing and increasing public engagement has arisen as a key theme during the development of a strategic plan. Like many other municipalities, Clarington recognizes it will need to invest in improved and more meaningful engagement, and is looking to create a stronger and more purposeful approach to hearing from its community.

The new strategic plan will likely more clearly identify specific goals and actions. Depending on the approved direction, there is likely to be a strong role for the communications team. Skillsets and capacity may need to be enhanced.

Internal Communications and Engagement

Municipal staff are important communicators on behalf of the organization. Many of them engage every day with members of the community, and they can be leveraged as strong municipal ambassadors when they are well informed and feel engaged.

Clarington prides itself on providing excellent in-person and phone-based client services to its many residents. A significant part of providing residents with clear, definitive information, is having effective internal communications. Communications staff do their best with limited resources to upload information to The Hub – Clarington's internal intranet site – to help keep staff informed. They also provide all-staff emails from time to time.

As is common in many municipalities, external communications is the priority, and internal communications is left with little focus. We also see that who is responsible for internal communications is often unclear. This is the case in Clarington. A vision for internal communications, with clear roles and responsibilities has not been established. What is the role of the communications team vs. that of leaders or other department staff to ensure important Municipal news is shared and known? Staff report hearing news through the grapevine, even through public channels like social media or newspapers.

The Municipality has an intranet site called The Hub, but it is not consistently used as a central resource by staff. Reaching all staff is also challenging since some of field, volunteer or seasonal staff, do not have regular access to a computer or do not have a municipal email address. They rely heavily on information sharing from managers and supervisors, or their peers.

Finally, there's a sense in Clarington that staff from different departments don't really know each other, especially after the structural re-alignment of the corporation.

With a clear vision and strategy for internal communications, opportunities for networking and engagement could help to break down silos between departments, increase staff morale and sense of value, and create a stronger sense of one team, one Municipality.

Best Practices

Effective communication can play a pivotal role for a municipality and provide tangible benefits. It has the **power to persuade, influence, steer, and inspire.**

Benefits of Effective Communications for Municipalities

As we have seen across the municipal sector and based on insights from CAOs, communications leaders and elected officials, when it is done well, communications can accomplish four significant goals:

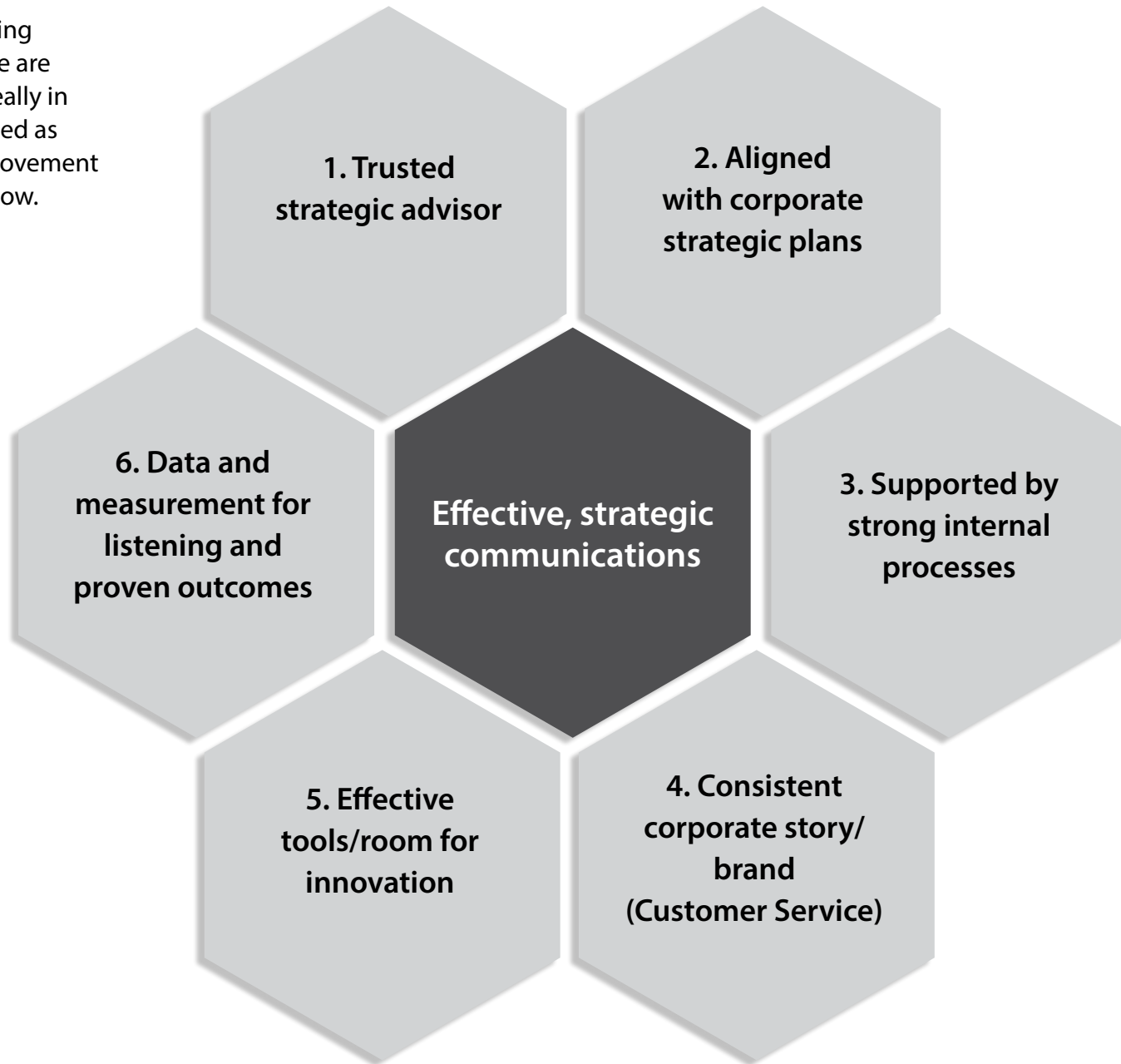
- 1. Increase community trust in local government**
 - Higher perception of professionalism and coordination
 - Greater awareness of how tax dollars are being used
 - Greater uptake of programs and services
 - Better media coverage; more community champions; increased positive profile
 - Higher engagement
- 2. Save taxpayer dollars**
 - Fewer issues, complaints and calls
 - Reduced need to engage lawyers for issues management
 - Mitigated resistance and project delays
- 3. Inspire behaviour change, improve service delivery**
 - Easier to implement change or new behaviours because there is more buy in and less resistance (e.g., new waste programs)
 - Inspire collaboration and influence program changes to better meet resident needs
 - Influence policy changes for more efficiency
- 4. Improve overall staff morale and trust from elected officials**
 - Staff feel more informed and engaged
 - Become stronger champions for the municipality
 - Easier to implement internal changes as needed (for example, new systems or processes)
 - Elected officials are better informed and prepared to speak with constituents
 - There is increased confidence in leadership

“When communications is always working in crisis, they are not being strategic nor bringing the greatest value.”

– Sara Goldvine, VP Communications and Public Affairs with BC Housing

Overarching Best Practices

To achieve the benefits noted above and respond to the changing communications landscape, there are several best practices that are ideally in place. These best practices are used as the baseline for the areas of improvement in the recommendations that follow.



- 1. Trusted strategic advisor:** Effective corporate communications teams are highly trusted and integrated within the corporation. They have a seat at leadership tables. They are considered strategists, not simply tacticians. They are consulted regularly for strategic advice and input for key decisions. They play a role in business strategy and can help craft the narrative when issues arise. As such, they can respond quickly and with quality when issues arise or advise when not to engage. They play a critical role in the organization's risk management team.
- 2. Aligned with corporate goals and strategic plans:** Communications work should be guided by a corporate strategic communications plan (including a social media and public engagement strategies) that aligns with corporate priorities and sets clear direction to teams. These plans are ideally endorsed by Council and allow communications to support every department in achieving their priorities, actions and objectives.
- 3. Supported by strong internal processes:** Every department across an organization should understand the role of communications, how and when to engage them and the policies that guide them. Strong processes instill a communications mindset that means communications is brought in early to project, is seen as a priority, and there is recognition that everyone has a role to play as a communicator for the municipality. Communicators are highly collaborative and should work hand in hand with every department and division.
- 4. Consistent corporate story/brand:** A brand speaks to who the organization is and what it stands for. A strong brand is achieved through consistency: in the messaging and story, and the look and feel of all materials. A strong brand has a clear voice and tone that comes through in every interaction. This is where communications overlaps and aligns with customer service. Both play a significant role in listening and responding to those they serve, and they should be integrated to ensure they are telling the same story and supporting each other.
- 5. Effective tools and room for innovation:** Communication teams should be highly innovative, trying new approaches and technologies, pushing boundaries within their mandate and continuously improving. They should be on top of the latest trends (for example, with social media) and technologies and supported by a culture that is willing to step outside the box.
- 6. Data and measurement for listening and proven outcomes:** Communicators should be driven by data and able to demonstrate the value they bring through measured outcomes, not simply outputs. For example, they should be listening to audiences to understand how they consume content and use that data to inform approaches. They should be able to show increased influence on social media and the ability to manage negativity and keep it at bay. They should have the ability to leverage media and increase coverage that is accurate and aligned with messaging. They should also be able to demonstrate how they have prevented an issue or managed it well before it became a crisis.

Analysis

Based on the research, Redbrick has conducted a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges analysis. This analysis informs the recommendations in this report.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dedicated team of communicators, some with design backgrounds and communications expertise who care about their role at the municipality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Departments work in silos. There's a lack of shared knowledge and clear understanding about the role of communications.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Despite limited resources, the puts out a high quantity and variety of communications materials. They want to be innovative, creative, and publish high-quality work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some departments feel it would be beneficial to have a person in their own department who have permission to post to social media, for example, but they feel there is a lack of trust in being able to do that.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The CAO and council see the value of communications and support the enhancement of the department. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Departments do not consistently involve communications early enough in projects. Communications/design is sometimes rushed and/or ends up not being as timely as it could be.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff in other departments want to work with communications to share the news and accomplishments from their respective departments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processes to engage communications are not clear. Not all departments use the same approach to connect with the communications team. Some use the form, others call, others walk into the office.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic Planning process has identified stronger communications and public engagement as high priorities and key themes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Branding isn't always consistent and could be stronger
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity to build a stronger two-way connection between communications and customer service staff to improve the pulse on the community, flag issues early, identify areas where the community needs more information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stronger processes and policies are needed to set clearer expectations, common understanding of timelines and stronger collaboration and communications amongst the communications team itself and with departments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current communications efforts are not tied to annual business plans. Annual planning calendars and regular meetings with departments would make communications more strategic and aligned corporately
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Day-to-day operational work is the main focus of the team. There are missed opportunities to tell more strategic and meaningful corporate stories

OPPORTUNITIES	CHALLENGES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings with each department head to develop a communications calendar, whether it be monthly, bi-monthly, annually, etc. will help with flow of timely messaging, and allow the department to plan ahead. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both internally and externally, it's felt the website is not effective nor easily navigable. Currently no internal resources to do a full evaluation and revamp of the website.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular reporting to council will help demonstrate the value for investments in communications and help the community understand the effort taken to reach various audiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Population growth is happening quickly, putting a lot of demand and increased pressure on communications staff. There's a risk of staff burnout with no additional resources, or the inability to meet growing resident needs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public is generally engaged and if consulted, would provide data to inform communications priorities and level of current success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current practices do not consistently include measurement and evaluation of success, missing opportunities for lessons learned and continuous improvement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff in other departments want to work with communications to share the news and accomplishments from their respective departments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processes to engage communications are not clear. Not all departments use the same approach to connect with the communications team. Some use the form, others call, others walk into the office.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can capitalize on social media as an effective communications tool. Opportunity to expand into video eventually. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A mixed demographic demands broader communications efforts. A mix of print and digital. There's a feeling that the older population isn't on social media. There is currently limited data to determine the most effective approach to reach audiences.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can share stories and humanize staff as "neighbours" doing good everyday work in the community. Similarly, the municipality has many positive stories to share achievements and progress and value for taxpayers' dollars. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fast growing community means that Clarington needs to be proactive in telling the story of well managed growth and development.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Great relationship with local media. Content is clean, photos are high quality. Opportunity to leverage further and have more content published. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current processes are limited for proactive issues management. As community demands and engagement increase, as will the need for stronger issues management processes.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trust in local government has decreased since the pandemic. The Municipality will need to strengthen its visibility and proactive communications to build greater trust over time.

Recommendations

Based on our research, best practices, sector knowledge and key findings, the Municipality of Clarington has a number of factors to consider when planning to enhance the communications function going forward. Redbrick recommends the following seven priorities and associated actions.

Recommendations are rated using the following scale of priority:

High = next 6 months to 1 year

Medium = next 1 to 2 years

Low = 2 to 3 years

Best Practice Areas of Improvement

Each recommendation and action below aligns with the municipal communications best practices identified earlier in this report.



Number	Area
1	Trusted strategic advisor
2	Aligned with corporate plans
3	Supported by internal processes
4	Consistent corporate story/brand
5	Effective tools /room for innovation
6	Data and Measurement for proven outcomes

Priority #1: Strengthen the communications team structure

Description/high level current state: Clarington is currently supported by four communications staff, under the manager of strategic initiatives. For the size of the municipality, Clarington's staff complement is smaller than that of like-sized municipalities. It is currently under-resourced and becoming overwhelmed. Roles and responsibilities are unclear, with missed opportunities to provide greater strategic value to the organization, including effective and proactive issues management response, and to keep up with social media and other technological trends.

Following the table below is a proposed communications team structure for the Municipality of Clarington.

Risks

- Weakened Municipal brand and reputation
- Missed opportunities to respond quickly and effectively to merging issues
- Lack of clarity surrounding roles and responsibilities leaves gaps that allow misunderstandings, inefficiencies and an increased risk of staff error and oversights
- Consistent reactive approach
- Not meeting legislative requirements. Legislation impacting municipalities continues to evolve, communications staff must ensure that the Municipality meets several requirements under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA)* including creating and providing information in accessible formats and meeting website accessibility standards. Other Ontario municipalities have received fines as the result of a complaint filed about communications activities related to the Act, specifically website accessibility
- Staff burnout as demands continue to increase leading to lowered staff morale as well as increased risk of staff turnover and the associated Human Resources costs
- Inability to keep up with changing technology, trends and updated channel algorithms leading to a failure to implement the best practice standards of comparable municipalities

Benefits

- Greater alignment with corporate priorities and a more strategic approach
- Increased ability for proactive communications and connection with departments
- More capacity for consistent coverage and backfilling
- Broader reach and stronger community building
- Strengthened customer service; consistency of information to the public; early issues mitigation
- Improved capacity to respond in the event of an emergency or crisis impacting the municipality.
- A senior communications practitioner will provide the skills and leadership experience necessary to fulfil the legislated role of Public Information Officer under *The Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act* and provide strategic communications leadership to the Municipality's emergency response team.

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Add greater capacity to the communications team and enhance the Municipality's approach to public engagement through the creation of two net-new positions and the re-alignment of existing Manager position:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A senior practitioner in the role of Communications and Public Engagement Supervisor • A Communications and Public Engagement Officer • A Digital Communications Coordinator (discussed below) 	<p>Other like-sized municipalities have greater communications FTE complements. Refer to chart on page 24 of the report.</p> <p>The Municipality is missing a senior practitioner to work closely with departments, work on high-profile and sensitive initiatives and provide guidance for public engagement, to strengthen the Municipality's ability to anticipate issues, get out in front of them with strategic positioning, and provide oversight to the leadership and others.</p> <p>This person can also be the starting point to provide greater oversight to and enhance the Municipality's public engagement efforts.</p> <p>In other municipalities, Communications Officers (or Advisors) work closely with departments, develop strategy, positioning and key messaging. They are strong writers and create plans to meet department goals and objectives. In Clarington, there is a need to elevate this function and add more capacity to meet departmental needs. The proposed organizational chart also includes a second position that could be considered in the future.</p>	Council/CAO	H	1,2,3

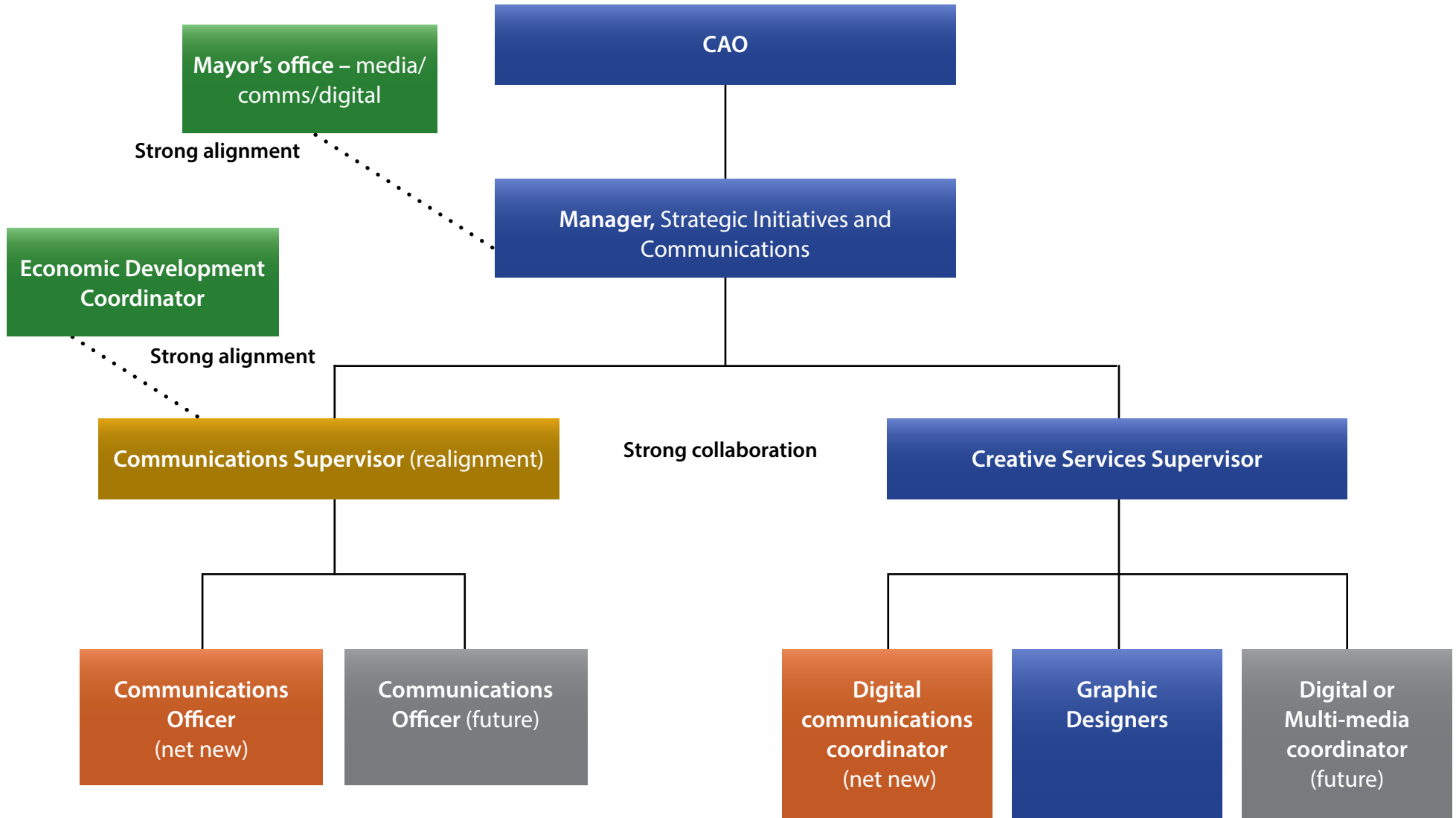
Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Realign the structure in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiate strategic communications roles and tactical roles, yet ensure collaboration • Create a Creative Services Supervisor role for stronger project management, quality assurance 	<p>To reach audiences, content needs to be timely, visual and engaging. Departments rely on this content to help share their messages and information. Research shows demands for this content in increasing across every organization. Graphic designers and digital media specialists play a significant role. A Supervisor of Creative Services will be able to capture incoming requests and see them through to completion ensuring all timelines and quality standards are met.</p> <p>Communications plays a leading role in protecting the reputation of the Municipality and demonstrating value for taxpayers' dollars. Clear, professional, timely communications help get you there.</p> <p>Strategic communicators develop strategies, manage projects, and confidently lead municipalities through the communications process from concept and positioning to evaluating results and reporting back to Council. Graphic designers and digital coordinators bring them to life. These areas must be highly connected and collaborative to be effective and deliver the highest value.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Note: Based on best practice and the intended role of communications staff in issues management, communications staff are ideally not part of the union given the need for and importance of them having access to confidential information especially for issues management, such as union negotiations or labour strikes.</i> 	<p>CAO/Manager of Strategic Initiatives</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>1,2,3</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Increase the team's capacity for digital media and data analysis - hire a Digital Communications Coordinator.</p>	<p>To become a more modern organization, digital and visual storytelling is more important than ever. Being able to create engaging content, appropriate for the channels used, and understand and interpret analytics and data are critical.</p> <p>Websites are a central information source, as is social media. On these channels, algorithms are regularly updated. Adding additional digital capacity is critical to keep up with trends, tools and best practices and inform best use of these channels and meet AODA standards. The Municipality needs additional capacity in this area.</p>	<p>Manager of Strategic Initiatives</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>4,5,6</p>
<p>Enhance the Municipality's ability to create video and multi-media content. Clarington can either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hire for an in-house resource • budget to engage third parties as needed 	<p>Across the board, municipalities are investing in digital communications expertise on their teams to keep up with trends and meet community expectations. Statistics clearly show that video content is more engaging, highly shared and easily remembered.</p> <p>Municipalities are adding greater capacity in this area. As Clarington thinks about the future of the team, adding more capacity for video creation will be important.</p>	<p>Manager of Strategic Initiatives</p>	<p>L</p>	<p>4,5</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Strengthen the link between Communications and Customer Service: consider having these two areas in the same division - or creating a dotted line reporting to ensure regular collaboration.</p>	<p>Many municipalities now have communications and customer service under the same director. Their work aligns as both areas support the other, both have a pulse on the community and both provide information to the public.</p> <p>Communications advisors create the key messages customer service staff need to deliver to the public in order to ensure a high standard of customer service, accuracy and efficiency.</p> <p>Customer Service staff track public complaints, compliments and feedback and Communications Advisors rely on this information to inform communications strategies that will be effective for the municipality. Customer Service staff are often the first to become aware of a shift in public opinion on specific Municipal programs or services. This information helps communicators and departments identify opportunities to enhance public consultation and strengthen public education.</p>	<p>CAO, Manager of Strategic Initiatives</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>1,3,4</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Establish regular connections between the Mayor's office and Economic Development.</p>	<p>These areas are outward facing and engage audiences. To ensure consistency across the organization, these areas must work collaboratively with communications on a regular basis.</p> <p>Staff in the Mayor's office are often the first to become aware of political issues emerging within the community. As such, an effective and efficient relationship is needed to ensure the Mayor and Council are properly briefed and provided with staff communications support as/when needed.</p> <p>Mayor's office staff can act as a go between to report Council's questions/concerns about ongoing communications work to streamline processes and eliminate duplication of effort by the Mayor and individual Councillors.</p> <p>While economic development operates with its own dedicated communication/marketing resource, their work directly impacts the tax base. Messaging should be consistent, aligned, and complimentary to ensure both communications and economic development are working as efficiently as possible to attract new residents, visitors, investors and businesses to the area.</p>	<p>Manager of Strategic Initiatives, Mayor, Director of Planning and Development</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>1,2,3</p>

Proposed communications team structure



Priority #2: Strengthen Clarington's issues / risk management approach

Description/high level current state: During the internal interviews, a common theme was related to the need for stronger issues management processes and more proactive responses. Issues and risk are related. When issues are not well managed, there is greater risk to the organization: its reputation, trust from the community, and there can be possible legal ramifications. When we train, we say "issues management starts today." The more a municipality can build community champions, proactively prepare responses, keep Council informed, increase trust through positive action, and build stronger relationships, the easier it is to manage issues when they arise.

Issues and risks such as cyber attacks, more severe weather events, discussing sensitive topics like housing and homelessness, are all examples of common issues that have been increasing in frequency, complexity and in some cases, severity, over the past few years. Municipalities need to be prepared to respond and be setting a proactive foundation for these conversations.

In the event that a municipal emergency response is needed, the Municipality of Clarington will need a senior communications professional with the specific skillset required to lead the organization through difficult times at a moment's notice. This position needs the flexibility to work hours outside of typical union contracts and must have the authority to access confidential documents as the emergency response strategy may require.

Risks

- Reduced trust and diminished reputation
- Possible legal liability
- Fueled anger on social media
- Increased staff time required to manage complaints and customer service inquiries
- More demand on elected officials to manage public complaints and inquiries
- If staff don't feel they are being appropriately protected and supported by management when issues occur, the municipality risks increased union complaints, staff burnout and staff turnover, along with reduced job satisfaction, productivity and loss of trust
- Inability to appropriately monitor, evaluate and prepare to proactively respond to issues with current staff compliment

Benefits

- Mitigated legal liability
- Fewer complaints
- Reduced staff time spent responding to public inquiries
- Saves time and money by preventing issues from becoming crises
- Enhances ability to provide effective crisis management
- Greater public satisfaction with the work of staff and elected officials

Sample risk factors for consideration

Internal Risk Factors	External Risk Factors
New personnel	Economic environment
Change in management responsibilities	Change in legislation or regulations
New programs and/or systems	Change in technologies
Changes in controls	Community and resident needs or expectations

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Ensure roles, responsibilities, approach, standards and processes are clearly defined and Council is well informed.</p> <p>Continue to rollout and use the established Council issues briefing note template to all departments to ensure it is used consistently.</p>	<p>An issues briefing note for Council is a proven tool to build greater trust between Council and staff, share key messaging and help with consistency, and demonstrate there is a plan in place and action being taken to address the issue.</p>	<p>Communications and departments</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>1,3,4</p>
<p>Develop a phased issues management strategy (building on the draft currently being created) following a 3-step process for improving issues and risk mitigation from a communications lens:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify top issues and concerns Clarington's residents have or the Municipality has faced. These can include regular occurrences such as watermain breaks. 2. Assess their level of risk related to how likely they are to happen, and their consequences or impact on the organization or community. 	<p>Most issues are known or can be anticipated. When they are identified early or ahead of time, processes and messaging can be in place to help with quick response and confidence across the organization.</p>	<p>Communications and departments</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>1,2,3,4</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>3. Prepare to manage the risk. As a starting point, choose three for which to develop pre-approved related key messaging and materials based on the impact level (media releases, social media content, photos etc.). Keep in mind that one topic may have different impact levels. For example, if a watermain break is on a busy, main road, the impact and response will need to be greater than if on a side street.</p> <p>Over time, follow the same process and build on the issues covered.</p>				
<p>Include Customer Service staff as part of the issues management process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish the expectation the communications and customer service operate collaboratively as a team. • Set up weekly meetings with communications to share call trends and potentially flag issues or find opportunities to strengthen messaging to mitigate issues. • When issues arise, share messaging with customer service staff as a matter of course. 	<p>As indicated above, collaboration between Customer Service and Communications can help to identify issues early, mitigate them and ensure consistent messaging is shared if they do occur.</p> <p>For some municipalities, the customer service division is being integrated as part of communications divisions. In some case, where relationships between managers are strong, this reorganization is not necessary. Regardless of the approach, ongoing collaboration is critical.</p>	CAO	H	2,3,4

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>If appropriate, reach out to moderators of local social media groups and channels to identify opportunities to correct misinformation and guide members of the public to Municipal facts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Note, this requires some political acuity, and sensitivity related to how open or closed the moderator may be to authentic dialogue with government.</i> 	<p>The spread of misinformation on social media is a challenge for every municipality. Some, like the City of Kawartha Lakes, are finding some success in reaching out to local group moderators in an effort to correct inaccurate information and set up processes to guide the community to the facts. It will take time to build trust, but it can be an important step forward with key and influential members of the community.</p>	<p>Communications</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>4,5</p>
<p><i>This section is included twice because of its potential for communications.</i> Artificial Intelligence tools, like ChatGPT or Microsoft CoPilot, can be used to support communications and writing efficiency. However, they need to be used with caution and cannot replace communications expertise and strategic thinking.</p> <p>Clarington's leaders, with communications at the table, should develop clear policies and corporate expectations around their use.</p>	<p>As indicated above, as Clarington plans for the future, it cannot ignore that AI tools are advancing rapidly. They are already being adopted for customer service and will be used increasingly over time for communications and writing - and not only by communications staff.</p> <p>While AI can assist in communications efficiency, it is important that municipalities consider the risks. These tools are machines, not humans. They miss nuance, tone and context. They can be used as a starting point, if desired, but caution and policies are needed to guide their use. Communications professionals must be at the table when these policies are being considered.</p>	<p>CAO, department heads, communications</p>	<p>L</p>	<p>1,5</p>

Priority #3: Invest in more purposeful public engagement

Description/high level current state: As indicated, public engagement has become a significant area of focus for municipalities. Many are putting more investment in this area to meet increased expectations from their communities to have a voice in local decision making. Effective engagement takes resources and commitment, which can pay off in greater community trust, stronger decision making and strengthened connection with key stakeholders. Communications often support, and in some cases, lead public engagement. They can help promote opportunities, ensure participants are well informed and provide strategic advice and counsel on approach.

At Clarington, currently public engagement is led by departments that may have mandates to engage, such as Planning, or ad hoc based on the impact of the initiative. A more proactive, strategic approach will ensure a more consistent and meaningful approach going forward.

Risks

- Reduced trust
- Misunderstanding of the decision-making process
- Greater community resistance
- Not reaching key impacted audiences, or missing opportunities to engage with Indigenous or other equity seeking groups
- Increased risk of FOI requests when residents feel the municipality is being dishonest, not disclosing important information or not listening to what the community wants
- Increased staff and political time required to respond to questions and concerns, increased amount of Council meeting deputations and correspondence when people don't understand work that the municipality is undertaking, and how it impacts them

Benefits

- Greater trust
- Exceeding legislative requirements
- More community champions and strengthened relationships with key audiences
- Better meeting the needs of equity seeking groups and ensuring they have a voice and do not feel ignored
- Increased effectiveness and efficiency when there is a dedicated team with experience and expertise overseeing and advising on public engagement projects, as opposed to department staff leading projects on an ad hoc basis.
- Improved decision making that takes into greater consideration, the community's input

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Clarify the organization’s goals and expectations related to public engagement, as per the new strategic plan.</p>	<p>Different municipalities have taken different approaches in the development of their public engagement frameworks and toolkits. Clarington will need to clarify their level of commitment and promise to the public when it comes to engagement.</p> <p>Examples: City of Burlington Community Engagement Charter, which is an agreement between Council and citizens.</p> <p>City of Kingston public engagement documents</p>	<p>Council, CAO</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>1,2,4</p>
<p>Build up public engagement expertise and skillsets across the organization. Ensure at least one staff is trained and certified by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2).</p>	<p>IAP2 is recognized as the global gold standard for public engagement. Municipalities across the country have adopted their model as the foundation of their work. Certified staff can be leveraged to help others across the organization strategically plan, implement and close out engagement initiatives to increase trust between local government and those they serve.</p>	<p>Communica- tions</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>1,2</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Identify populations that are commonly missed in engagement initiatives. (This could include Indigenous or other equity seeking groups.) Develop a strategy to engage them in how best they can be reached and engaged in the future to strengthen their voice and ties with the Municipality.</p>	<p>Municipalities must ensure they offer opportunities for all members of their communities to be heard and have a voice. The Municipality should consider who may be being missed during typical engagement exercises to find out directly from representatives of these groups, how best to engage them in the future. This exercise must be inclusive of non-native English speakers.</p>	<p>CAO, Department heads, communications</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>1,2,</p>
<p>Build on the Municipality's Public Engagement Framework and enhance the toolkit section to assist in easier planning and implementation.</p>	<p>Easy-to-use planning templates can help municipal staff strategically plan for public engagement. It ensures they will close the loop once engagement is complete, which is the most common gap in achieving meaningful engagement. Clarington's current framework is a good start. It can be enhanced following some of the examples above (e.g., Kingston).</p>	<p>Communications</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>3,5</p>

Priority #4: Increase positive storytelling, the ability to communicate quickly and share timely factual information

Description/high level current state: Audiences are inundated with content. Speed trumps accuracy, and while municipalities approve text, audiences are consuming and creating their own content. At the same time, the media landscape has changed, with fewer newspapers and reporters. Attention spans have decreased. It's important that municipalities become their own newsrooms, tell their own story and have processes that ensure they can communicate quickly.

Risks

- Reduced trust
- Missed opportunities to share Municipal achievements
- Spread of misinformation and greater difficulty to correct it
- Social media users expect a more immediate response than traditional forms of interaction, delayed response time can be perceived as poor customer service

Benefits

- Increased understanding of the value for taxpayers' dollars
- Ability to share factual information
- More engaging and timely content - more engagement on social media
- Improved rates of public satisfaction and community engagement with the municipality
- Positive community stories promote community pride and social involvement
- Opportunity to share positive municipal stories and project wins that traditional media may not share
- When you identify the information that is most important to your audience, present it in an engaging way, and in a timely manner, you ensure that it will be useful to the community you serve and shared more broadly with others

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
Leverage the new strategic plan to develop consistent corporate messages to be used in communications materials.	<p>Strategic plans define mission, visions and values. These foundational organizational pieces can be used to develop the corporate story that becomes embedded in communications materials, speeches etc. as appropriate.</p> <p>Clarington's coming new strategic plan is an opportunity to leverage the work and feedback from the community to root a stronger, consistent Municipal story.</p>	Communications	M	1,2,4
Leverage regular meetings with departments to mine good news stories and content. Identify key staff, and support them in how to take quality photos.	Consistent feedback from staff is that the community does not see all the good work the Municipality delivers every day. Regular connections with departments and setting up staff to take quality photos will help tell these stories more consistently.	Communications, department staff	M	2,4
Develop a social media strategy to ensure the purposeful use of these channels, target audiences and clarify roles and responsibilities.	<p>Social media is an important tool to engage audiences, including the media, and to manage issues. The Municipality should take a step back to review their current use of social media, and develop a strategy to enhance their approach and consider which tools will bring the greatest value.</p> <p>Respondents to the public survey indicated that they are on Facebook, but more than half do not follow the Municipality. Staff also indicated that youth are a key audience being missed. There are opportunities to improve content based on each channel's strength. If a new digital media person is added to the team, they can support this work.</p>	Communications	M	3,5

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Once a strategy is established, increase promotion of the Municipality's channels.</p>	<p>As above, respondents to the public survey indicated that they are on Facebook, but more than half do not follow the Municipality. More awareness is needed as to where the Municipality is active.</p>	<p>Communications</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>4,5,6</p>
<p>Create and continue to build up a photo library with local photos during all seasons, staff at work, municipal facilities and assets, fleets (such as snowplows). This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allotting time to communications staff to take local shots on a regular basis • Hiring a photographer two to three times a year • Offer photo contests for members of the community to share local photos • Training identified staff who work in the field on how to take a good picture • Reaching out to local service groups and organizations for event and community photos. 	<p>Municipalities need to tell their local story. This includes visually. As part of the Municipality's efforts to create more authentic content, continually building on Clarington's library of local photos will help create stronger content and demonstrate how the Municipality is connected with its community.</p>	<p>Communications, possible department staff</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>4,5</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Humanize staff where possible:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take photos or simple video of staff in action in the community to share on social media • Build opportunities as part of communications plans • Consider identifying three or four staff to profile on social media and share the Municipal story • Look for opportunities to share “behind-the-scenes” stories and footage: e.g., host a “Touch a Truck” event or show firefighters in training. 	<p>There is a growing trend in municipalities to create more “human” content, showcase their staff and have a more authentic and approachable voice.</p> <p>This can be done simply, by taking photos of a staff person putting up a new stop sign for road safety for example, or it can be more in depth by taking video and having different staff as spokespeople - with guidance from communications.</p> <p>These stories also help establish a positive culture where staff effort and contributions are celebrated and recognized.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The City of Cambridge shared photos and video of one of their custodial staff to talk about the work he does every day to keep facilities maintained and in good working order. • The City of Kingston uses their Public Works manager for a regular feature called PW this Week. He shows where construction is taking place, why and what roads to avoid. • The Township of Lake of Bays featured their Director Finance in a humorous Twitter video reading a long list of all the infrastructure and assets the municipality is responsible for, to highlight the importance and value of good asset management practices. 	<p>Communications, department staff</p>	<p>L</p>	<p>2,4,5</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Create a video strategy for the Municipality taking a phased approach to build up more video content over time and increase the community's awareness of how the municipality is delivering value:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideas: Base them on top questions or concerns, identify one to two topics for which to develop a video as a starting point and build from there. 	<p>As indicated above, video content is more engaging and attracts more viewers. It is by far more highly shared with others. The Municipality should take a more strategic approach to video and look for opportunities over the coming years to develop more video content. It should be a mix of informal video and more professional.</p>	<p>Communications</p>	<p>L</p>	<p>2,4,5</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Investigate and put guidelines in place for the use of ChatGPT, Microsoft CoPilot, or other artificial intelligence tools to support communications efficiency. However, they need to be used with caution and intentionally with appropriate policies in place.</p> <p><i>Also discussed in the Issues Management section below.</i></p>	<p>As Clarington plans for the future, it cannot ignore that AI tools are advancing rapidly. They will be used increasingly over time to create content and automate responses to public inquiries and draft content. Their level of sophistication is still evolving. Some tools better than others. It is an area that is changing rapidly.</p> <p>Some communications professionals and other staff are starting to use ChatGPT and other tools to generate ideas, create early drafts or consider approaches for graphics and photos.</p> <p>While AI can assist in communications and writing efficiency, it is important that municipalities consider the risks. These tools are machines, not humans. They miss nuance, tone and context. They can be used as a starting point, if desired, but caution and policies are needed to guide their use. Communications professionals must be at the table when these policies are being considered.</p>	<p>Communications</p>	<p>L</p>	<p>1,5</p>

Priority #5: Establish a stronger communications mindset across the organization

Description/high level current state: High-functioning communications teams are at leadership tables, are brought in early to projects, have processes and policies that are well understood across the organization, and use tools to help them track, monitor and report on communications activities and priorities. The Municipality of Clarington has been putting effort into improving communications practices and clarifying roles and expectations. This work can be further enhanced so communications is kept top of mind across all departments.

Risks	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frustrated community because communications are reactive, not timely nor strategic• More complaints and issues to manage creating increased demands on staff, and further frustrating community members as response time are impacted• Greater risk for misinformation and additional staff time and Mayor/Councillor time required to address and correct misinformation• Departments not engaging communications and doing their own leading to inconsistencies and inefficient use of staff resources across the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater trust in the Municipality - higher perception it is well managed• Strengthened risk management across the organization• Stronger messaging with more time for strategic positioning and anticipating reaction or questions• Greater reach because audiences are thought through up front, and enough time is allotted to leverage and create the tactics that will reach target groups• Improved collaboration, reporting and information sharing between municipal departments, communicators and elected officials• Allows the municipality to provide enhanced value to taxpayers by streamlining communications processes and ensuring the right staff, with the right skillset, are involved in communications projects at the right time

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Once the Communication and Public Engagement Supervisor is in place, roll out a “communications road show” and increase the visibility of the team and expectations.</p>	<p>Educating staff across the organization about the role of communications, expectations for engagement, and processes is the first step in building a stronger communications mindset.</p> <p>Once the supervisor is in place, that person should become visible across all departments, start building relationships and setting the tone and expectations for how communications and departments will work together strategically and collaboratively.</p>	<p>Communications, Supervisor, departments</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>1,3,4</p>
<p>Implement strategic communications practices across the organization, build into existing project management processes where appropriate.</p>	<p>Many teams follow project management approaches. Communications should be embedded into these existing processes. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications is identified as a representative on the project team • A communications lead participates in kick-off meetings and processes • Communications and engagement plans are developed and part of the scope for all projects • Success measures, risk assessment plans, stakeholder matrixes all include communications input • Communications regularly monitors public/audience reaction and reports back to the project team to make any needed adjustments • Project close out reports include communications analytics, lessons learned and successes 	<p>Communications Supervisor/ Officer, departments</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>1,2,3</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Build off the Creative Services Catalogue and Matrix Toolkit currently under development to ensure it details the role of communications, how they are to be engaged and includes a communications brief/checklist for all projects, common tactics and their associated timelines, close out reports.</p>	<p>Clear guidelines, tools and standards help departments and communications to work together more efficiently. A toolkit that lays out these expectations helps give clarity and establish a consistent approach to communications planning and implementation.</p>	<p>Communications,</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>2,3,4,5</p>
<p>At the beginning of each year or after the budget has been passed, establish meetings between communications and each department to discuss and map out needs for the year ahead.</p>	<p>High-functioning communications teams have established processes for departments and communications to connect regularly. Once the budget is passed, departments tend to develop their annual business workplans. This is an important opportunity to engage communications and start to map out the year ahead and working collaboratively to set early expectations of where communications may be needed, how they may be involved and what resources may be needed. It's the first step in taking a more proactive approach.</p> <p>Once in agreement, projects can be mapped out and tracked in Monday.com.</p>	<p>Manager of Strategic Initiatives, Department heads</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>2,3,6</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>When the Communications Supervisor and Officer roles are in place, establish bi-weekly or monthly meetings with department leads for planning and collaboration.</p>	<p>As above, regular, established meetings with departments are critical to create a communications mindset and ensure communications is kept top of mind. Departments with high communications needs should be meeting more frequently with communications to stay on top of needs.</p>	<p>Communications, department managers</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>1,2,3</p>
<p>Establish and approve a schedule of regular Days of Recognition calendar (e.g., National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, Pride Month).</p>	<p>Before and since the pandemic, Days of Recognition have become important to build community and for municipalities to demonstrate all are welcome. Often, deciding which days to recognize is challenging. Having intentional discussions around these days is important to help communications staff be proactive and prepared.</p>	<p>CAO, Manager of Strategic Initiatives, Department heads</p>	<p>H/M</p>	<p>2,4</p>
<p>Develop a 15-month communications and social media planning calendars that map out seasonal and annual occurrences (e.g., winter road maintenance, festivals), and upcoming projects.</p>	<p>Much municipal work is cyclical and can be anticipated and scheduled well in advance. 15-month calendars ensure communications is planning ahead, has the resources needed and is always thinking a year in advance to continually improve content. (e.g., in year one, they may not have strong photos of snowplows. They can take those pictures that year to use in future years.)</p>	<p>Manager of Strategic Initiatives</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>1,2,3,5</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Better leverage Monday.com for project initiation, tracking, resource management, priority setting, collaboration with departments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish the communications form (which links to Monday) as the way to engage and initiate projects, not just tactical requests. Review the form to ensure all necessary information is captured and leverage the information to guide conversations and approach with communications and departments. Provide regular reports to leaders and Council. 	<p>Monday.com can be used as a powerful tool to manage communications efforts. The risk is that the tool is too tactical in nature. It is important to differentiate between tactical needs, such as webpage updates, with strategic needs, such as the launch of a new initiative that requires a proper communications plan.</p> <p>The team can leverage 'boards' for larger projects or for department planning, assigning annual campaigns, Days of Recognition etc.</p> <p>The data and information from Monday.com can also support conversations with department heads about setting project priorities and reporting back to Council on communications achievements and workload.</p>	<p>Manager of Strategic Initiatives, communications</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>3,5,6</p>

Priority #6: Place more focus on internal communications across the corporation

Description/high level current state: Staff are the Municipality’s strongest ambassadors and communicators. They have pride in what they do and when valued, the Municipality benefits. Many staff also engage with members of the community every day, and when informed and engaged, they can broaden the Municipality’s reach with factual information and build stronger connections with the community. At Clarington, internal communications has lacked focus and priority. While there is an intranet called The Hub, posting content to the site is not consistent. It is unclear who provides oversight for internal communications and what the expectations are across departments.














Currently staff receive more information informally and is largely dependent on the ability of their manager or supervisor to share updates. More tools are available to support internal communications and reach all staff. The expectations of different generations also play a role and should be taken into consideration. (Refer to chart.)

Risks

- Low staff morale
- Reduced retention
- Increased risk of miscommunication due to informal “broken telephone” style information sharing between staff
- When internal communication is not clear and consistent it leaves room for rumours and speculation to fill the gaps
- Missed opportunities to leverage staff as important ambassadors for the Municipality
- Tension between union and non-union staff can develop through inconsistent internal communication processes
- Reduced ability for staff to embrace big picture thinking when departments work in silos and fail to communicate effectively
- Cross-departmental projects are more difficult to manage and less efficient when departments do not have an established working relationship built on trust and productive internal communications

Benefits

- Increased sense of staff belonging and value
- Increased staff job satisfaction, leading to less staff turnover and the associated recruitment and training costs
- Staff feel safe to share ideas for continuous improvement and become more engaged in their work
- Increased productivity
- Increased capacity and effectiveness of cross-departmental teams
- Increased organizational knowledge and improved attendance at internal staff events when staff engage with corporate communications materials

Traditional	Baby Boomer	Generation X	Millennial	Generation Z
 Phone Calls	 Phone Calls	 Voicemail	 Instant Message	 FaceTime
 Letters	 Face-to-Face	 Text	 Text	 Text
 Personal Notes	 Email	 Email	 Email	 Face-to-Face

From the [City of Dryden's 2020 Service Delivery Review](#) report by Blackline Consulting (page 32)

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Create an Internal Communications and Engagement Working Group with representatives from all departments to develop an internal communications strategy.</p> <p>The strategy should detail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goals and objectives • Measurements of success • Clear roles and responsibilities, recognizing staff across all departments have accountability • Strategies and tactics to reach and recognize all staff - regardless of workplace location, full/part-time or volunteer etc. 	<p>Effective and meaningful internal communications takes commitment, resourcing and action. Municipalities that put focused effort on internal communications and building a positive culture benefit in many ways, from improved productivity, higher morale, greater retention and more.</p> <p>The best way to develop an internal strategy is to better understand staff needs and to have it driven by staff. They can brainstorm opportunities to enhance internal communications and engagement, including approaches, tools, ideas for improved recognition, regular touchpoints, networking opportunities, etc.</p> <p>Leadership support is critical to success. Leaders are role models, set the tone and establish priority. All leaders must buy in to the strategy and support its rollout for it to be effective and successful.</p> <p>Communications and HR can co-chair this group.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> The Town of Newmarket has long emphasized the importance of internal communication and engagement. It is built into their values and it is part of building trust across the organization. Staff are engaged to inform, drive and participate in the internal strategy. Sample tactics include a staff newsletter created by staff “reporters”, coffee with the CAO, staff appreciation days and much more. As the communications director says, there is a “continuous sprinkling” of internal touchpoints and a commitment to leader visibility, strong recognition practices, and listening to employees.</p>	<p>Communications, and HR – strategy approved by senior leadership</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>2,3,4</p>

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Develop an internal communications policy based on the strategy. It should include how The Hub is used, ability to use other tools like Yammer or Microsoft Teams, recognition etc.</p>	<p>Putting a policy in place emphasizes the importance of internal communications and expectations for staff across the organization.</p>	<p>Communications, and HR</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>2</p>
<p>Develop and send a weekly update email from the CAO.</p> <p>It can be piloted to start and then after a 6 to 8-month period reviewed for effectiveness.</p>	<p>Based on survey results, all-staff emails have been an effective tool to share information. A brief, weekly email from the CAO can provide timely information and keep staff up to date with latest news from the Municipality. It also helps the leader be more visible across the organization and role model the importance of internal communications.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> the City of Kawartha Lakes sends a Friday Update to all staff. It is backed by a Management Directive that all leaders ensure their teams have seen the email week to week - in some cases they are expected to print and share it with their teams.</p>	<p>CAO, with support from communications</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>2,4</p>
<p>Develop a staff recognition strategy that aligns with the internal communications strategy.</p>	<p>Staff recognition is a critical part of building positive staff morale and staff feeling valued. Recognition should take many forms, from formal long-term service awards, to informal, day-to-day thank yous.</p> <p>As Clarington look to enhance its internal communications, intentional thought recognition should be considered and included in plans.</p>	<p>Leadership, HR, internal staff representatives</p>	<p>M</p>	

Priority #7: Enhance Clarington's brand consistency

Description/high level current state: An organization's brand tells you what it does and what it stands for. Each element of the brand contributes to the overall impression others have. As a part of the brand, the logo is important to conveying the professionalism and personality of the organization. Other key components of the brand include its voice, messaging and visuals. Each and every interaction the municipality has impacts its overall brand reputation. The level of professional alignment and efficiency of operating procedures between communications and customer service staff will play a critical role in determining the brand's success or failure. A good brand will positively contribute to the municipality's local economy, while a weak brand runs the risk of having a long-term negative impact on your local economy.

The role of communications is to protect and promote the municipal brand. Staff from both communications and other individual departments report there are opportunities to strengthen Clarington's brand identity and ensure it is used consistently across the organization.

The Municipality uses a wide variety of mediums to communicate. It is important to ensure the organization's voice is consistent with organizational values, while leaving enough flexibility for communicators to choose a level of formality that is appropriate for the communications medium being used. For example, the voice used on social media post should be less formal than the voice used for a tax insert or notice of a parking fine.

Risks

- Weakened Municipal reputation and professionalism from incorrect use of the Municipality's logo or inconsistent voice and use of visuals
- If too formal a voice on social media, a risk of missing key audiences such as youth, or content not being shared
- Reduced program participation and by-law compliance if key messages are not delivered in an effective, consistent and professional manner
- Failure meet AODA requirements
- Failure to provide clear, accurate and timely information to the public
- Public confusion and lack of trust created by a perceived inconsistency and lack of transparency
- Increased administrative expenses as a lack of consistency leads to additional staff time spent on non-value add activities, and inefficient processes

Benefits

- Strengthened public recognition of Municipal collateral materials and communications
- Stronger, more consistent voice and tone in every interaction
- Enhanced perception that the Municipality is well run
- Increase reach and engagement on social media
- Consistent processes and branding enhance and improve efficiencies during the onboarding and training process through times of staff turnover

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
Establish the communications team as having authority over the Municipality's brand.	Both department staff and communications reported they did not know who has authority over the Municipality's brand. This role should sit with communications. Departments should know to go to communications to confirm materials adhere with logo and style guidelines.	Manager of Strategic Initiatives, CAO	H	1,3,4
Invite communications to department meetings to talk about the brand guide and expectations of staff and where materials can be found.	<p>Presenting the brand guide to all departments ensures there is broad awareness and recognition of the Municipality's brand and expectations of use.</p> <p>Ensuring a central place to find the brand guide and any templates makes it easy for staff across the organization to access it and refer to it appropriately.</p>	Department heads and communications	H	1,2,3,4
Raise greater awareness of the common templates that exist and conduct an audit of their use of communications templates to identify what may be missing.	<p>The Municipality has established templates for common materials such as presentation slides, letterhead, e-signatures etc. to ensure departments are following the brand guidelines without communications needing to review all day-to-day materials.</p> <p>Based on feedback, it is unclear if these are being used consistently. More awareness may be needed as to where they can be found and how they should be used.</p>	Communications	L	3,4,5

Recommended actions	Rationale / Leading Practice	Responsibility	Priority Level	Best Practice Area(s) of Improvement
<p>Determine the Municipality's brand on social media - allow for some flexibility in tone of voice and content that is less formal and more approachable.</p>	<p>Engaging social media content is commonly less formal and more "human". Municipalities that have increased their followership or engagement statistics have often done that through a more casual voice, that is less rigid than in most written materials. It has also helped them reach audiences such as youth.</p> <p>The Municipality should determine what tone they are comfortable with on social media to increase how many people engage with them on these channels, and create a stronger perception of being approachable to their community.</p>	<p>Manager of Strategic Initiatives, CAO</p>	<p>H</p>	<p>4,5,6</p>

Conclusion

The Municipality of Clarington's current communications team is dedicated to providing good service and delivering quality content. At the same time, they recognize that demands are continuing to increase and more strategic skillsets are needed to strengthen the Municipality's ability for proactive issues management, more strategic and engaging approaches to sharing information, and being able to keep up with how audiences consume content online.

Council and the CAO are committed to enhancing the effectiveness of the team and see it as a priority as the community grows and expectations increase. The new corporate strategic plan will set new priorities and actions for the organization. Communications should have a roll supporting the achievement of these priorities.

At the departmental level, there are opportunities to strengthen relationships and collaboration and clarify processes and roles. There is an opportunity for the communications team to bring and demonstrate greater value across the organization and ensure they are seen and leveraged as trusted advisors and partners.

This report emphasizes that everyone across the Municipality has a role to play to support and ensure effective communications. It starts with a clear vision for the team and a solid structure that ensures the right capacity and skillsets are in place. From there, establishing priorities, supporting processes and educating departmental teams will go a long way in elevating what the dedicated communications team can deliver and offer each department and the community as a whole for years to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to work with you.



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