

Orange County, North Carolina



Strategic Communications Plan

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Purpose

The primary purpose of this Strategic Communications Plan is to promote effective communication between and among the Orange County Board of Commissioners, the residents of Orange County, and the departments and staff of Orange County Government.

Public access to government and freely shared information are cornerstones of the democratic process. Accordingly, this Plan is intended to simplify access to the Board of County Commissioners (hereinafter referred to as “BOCC” or “the Board”) and to the workings of Orange County government. Consistent with the County’s mission statement, this Plan establishes: guidelines, policies, and vehicles for accomplishing the Board's goals for effective communication; and best practices for organizing and executing communication efforts throughout Orange County government.

Mission

Orange County exists to provide governmental services requested by our residents or mandated by the State of North Carolina. To provide these quality services efficiently, we must:

- Serve the residents of Orange County - our residents come first.
- Depend on the energy, skills, and dedication of all our employees and volunteers.
- Treat all our residents and all our employees with fairness, respect, and understanding.

Objectives

Objectives of the Strategic Communications Plan include:

- To establish the communications roles of the Board of County Commissioners
- To establish the communications roles of departments/staff/county management
- To establish the communications roles of the Public Affairs Office/ Public Information Officer

- To establish the ways in which County government entities receive and process information from the public and respond to the public
- To formalize protocols for: handling of critical or sensitive issues; coordinating information during emergencies or crises; and handling fast-breaking, complicated, or controversial issues

Guiding Principles

This Plan emphasizes the following overarching principles:

- Promote the ability of the Board and residents to access information
- Disseminate information to the public (and other audiences) in a manner that is clear, concise, transparent, helpful, timely, proactive, and consistently professional
- Implement and promote opportunities and mechanisms to obtain regular feedback from targeted audiences, especially Orange County residents
- Promote two-way communications between the members of the BOCC and Orange County residents
- Utilize a variety of targeted communication methods and strategies so as to be effective and appropriate for the specific situation
- Afford the BOCC opportunities to relay information and to exercise ongoing oversight of this Communications Plan, while leaving implementation to the County Manager and County Departments
- Provide a unified, coherent voice for Orange County Government, especially as a source of information during crisis or emergency situations
- Foster a mindset of continual planning to keep Orange County communications efforts fresh and responsive
- Promote communications between Board members and the rest of County government, including employees, generally through the County Manager

Situational Analysis

Data compiled during the information gathering and plan development phases of the Strategic Communications project suggest the following organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for Orange County Government as of the end of 2014:

Strengths

- Some departments have staff members whose time is earmarked primarily or in part to managing communications, consumer education, and public information efforts for their respective departments
- Existing communication hardware and software capabilities that facilitate cablecasting BOCC meetings, web access to BOCC minutes/agendas/meeting recordings, and disseminating social media traffic
- Solid external intergovernmental communications relationships (e.g. Standing Committee of emergency communicators including the Towns, UNC, volunteer agencies, utilities, etc)
- Commitment to communications operations through staffing, dedicated budget, and committed resources/support

Weaknesses

- Absence heretofore of clearly defined, written public information and communications objectives for Orange County Government as an entity
- Current job description of Public Affairs Director does not meet the needs or expectations of the organization
- Organizational confusion regarding the current roles and responsibilities of the Public Affairs Office/Public Information Office
- Certain departments lack dedicated staff resources sufficient to meet identified public information/communication needs
- Lack of ongoing staff training and certification in communications, with the exception of a few departments
- Lack of a newsroom or blog for open forum questions & answers

- Lack of dedicated and experienced in-house graphic design professionals

Opportunities

- Consider Board prioritization among required communication functions to ensure that the most critical information needs are addressed first
- Examine existing Countywide staffing (both permanent and temporary) and contracted resources for potential to accomplish various other communication functions
- Consider whether some members of advisory boards and commissions, and other volunteers, may periodically be able to offer skills that match up with the inventory of needed communication functions identified in this Plan
- Broadly disseminate existing communications plans and guidance from Emergency Services Department to enhance knowledge across the spectrum of County departments regarding how to communicate effectively in emergency or crisis situations
- Take advantage of knowledge and skill sets of dedicated communications professionals in various departments to execute a practical, purposeful cross-training program to assist Department Heads and other key departmental staff in carrying out their responsibilities under this Strategic Communications Plan
- Increase use of existing technology (e.g. social media, the County Listserv, etc)

Threats

- Possible organizational inertia regarding (re)assignment of various communication duties to the most appropriate parties, based on individuals' knowledge, skill sets, and abilities
- Potential limitations on available financial resources to acquire/employ emerging technological tools or to hire staff (permanent and/or temporary) or contractors to carry out certain desired communication functions outlined in this Plan

Scope and Applicability

This Plan is intended to be applicable to all aspects of Orange County government. As a Countywide Plan, its provisions address any type of communication between two or more parties.

To properly discharge their responsibilities towards their constituents, County Commissioners must be kept properly apprised about relevant policies, programs, and events within the purview of each County department. That notwithstanding, County department heads and staff need to have considerable autonomy to carry out their public information and communication responsibilities based on their professional competencies, in a manner not inconsistent with the overarching principles and standards established in this Plan. Existing departmental communications plans and processes are complemented, not supplanted, by this Plan.

Roles

Adoption of this Plan contemplates the following ongoing communications roles:

Board of County Commissioners:

- approve periodic updates to the adopted Plan
- appoint two Commissioners annually to serve on the Communications Governance Team to provide oversight and recommend appropriate refinements to the Plan
- consider recommendations from the County Manager to allocate financial, staff, and technological resources to address unmet or emerging communications needs
- provide guidance and direction to the County Manager and Public Information Officer that will disseminate information to residents and other audiences regarding significant County programs/policies/events/initiatives

County Manager:

- assign and direct staff to accomplish the strategies laid out in this Plan in a timely and effective way
- supervise the Public Information/Public Affairs function for Orange County Government
- prioritize communications work to match available resources
- periodically apprise the BOCC on progress in implementing this Plan - including capabilities and constraints to achieving objectives, and recommendations for addressing any shortcomings

County Departments:

- establish or maintain departmental plans or processes for executing their own communications functions in a manner consistent with the County's overall Plan
- support the Manager and other departments by sharing staff/technological/other resources when feasible to accomplish County communications goals and objectives

Public Information Officer:

- perform duties as assigned by the County Manager
- serve as an information coordinator for departments
- convene and provide leadership for County department communicators
- foster strong relationships with representatives of all forms of media and serve as liaison between those persons and the County Commissioners and County Manager
- when so designated by the County Manager or Emergency Services Director, serve as spokesperson for the County during emergency or crisis situations. In accord with North Carolina law, only the Chair of the Board may declare an official state of emergency.
- serve as a resource for marketing and promoting Orange County services

Audience Identification

In broad strokes, this Plan recognizes its Primary Target Audiences to include Residents; Media; Orange County Employees; and the Current Business Community. Secondary Target Audiences include Visitors; Other Governmental Officials (local, state, federal); Community Groups (e.g. civic organizations, faith-based organizations); Potential Business Recruitments; and Potential Future Residents.

In more practical terms, the target audiences for any particular piece of County communication will depend on the type of message, the nature of the messenger, available communications resources and tools, and the particular environmental circumstances at the time. Specific audiences are then more narrowly focused from the general grouping, taking into consideration any targeted marketing campaign, which tools should be used, and any strategic messages.

Communications decision-makers should review the checklist at Appendix A to determine which of the potential audiences are to be specifically targeted recipients of communications under the particular set of circumstances at hand. In many cases, audiences on that list will be non-applicable or redundant. The rationale behind creating and using the list in that appendix is to err on the side of considering too large a list, then to reduce it by purposeful analysis - as opposed to considering too small a list and improperly ignoring an important audience for the message.

Tools/Asset Identification

Orange County Government communicators are afforded wide discretion in selecting and employing the mechanisms and vehicles for transmitting information to their desired audiences in any particular set of circumstances. Appendix B provides a list of potential tools to be considered for each communication event. This list reflects both those communication tools that are available to Orange County Government and those that may become available in the future.

Legal and Ethical Considerations

All communications disseminated by Orange County Government will be tested against the highest ethical and legal standards, to ensure that the County faithfully serves the public in a manner consistent with its mission statement, to the best of its ability.

- North Carolina Open Meeting/Public Records Laws - The State's open meeting and public records laws are critical to operating a fair and open government. The spirit with which public officials work to comply with the law is as important as the law itself. Recognizing that the public's business should be done in the open and honoring requests for help serves the people in a transparent manner.
- Accessibility – Orange County will make reasonable efforts to ensure that the information concerning policies and programs is available to all despite the many barriers that could hinder effective communication. These barriers could include, but are not necessarily limited to, access to media/technology, language, and physical disabilities.
- Informing Versus Persuading – The BOCC and all County departments strive proactively to provide all residents with complete and unbiased information on issues that may be, or are currently being, considered by the BOCC. This is especially important on matters that are coming to the Commissioners before the full Board has deliberated, voted, and established an official position. In instances where it may be appropriate for the BOCC to adopt a voice of persuasion (e.g. encouraging voters to vote on a bond referendum), County communication will be carefully crafted to recognize and explain the distinction between information intended to educate and information intended to influence. The County Departments serve as responsible advocates for the Board's policy decisions by providing clear, concise, and accurate information to all. The County will provide the data and reasoning behind the policy decisions so that residents can understand how these decisions were made.
- Collective Versus Individual Commissioner Communications — The Chair of the Board acts as the spokesperson for the Board. In the absence of the Chair, the Vice Chair or Chair's designee acts as spokesperson. In the interests of clarity and transparency, individual County Commissioners will take care to dispel any reasonable confusion about whether they are communicating on behalf of the Board as a whole or whether

they are communicating their own individual viewpoints.

Alignment and Integration

The full implementation of this Plan will include developing the messaging framework to articulate the connection between this plan and:

- the BOCC's mission, vision and values
- the County Manager's Office/Public Information Office communications activities
- department specific communications/marketing plans
- relevant emergency communication plans (e.g. Emergency Services, Public Health, Sheriff, municipalities, school systems)

County staff will regularly explore opportunities for integrating messages across platforms and media that will allow the County to react quickly to changes in social media, as well as to better leverage existing County communications resources.

All communications activities are to be developed and executed within the context of the County's overarching strategy.

Strategy Implementation/Action Plan

The following prioritized list of actions was developed to promote achievement of BOCC communication goals and objectives. It is important that any persons involved in Orange County Government communications pursue these steps in a manner that is consistent with the Board's overarching vision for transparency, accuracy, timeliness, and integrity in the information exchange process.

PRIORITY A

1. Create and appoint a standing Communications Governance Team comprised of two Commissioners and staff to provide ongoing oversight of the Communications Plan with responsibility to make at least annual reports to the full Board of Commissioners. The report will include an evaluation of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to Orange County communications set forth in this Plan and an update of those items.

2. Create an internal County communications workgroup, modeled after the Council of Webmasters, which includes communications primes for each department (if they have one or have a need) and provides mutual awareness and support through sharing of projects, tips, and issues.
3. Purposefully convene the Communications Governance Team ahead of anticipated community policy/program/event discussions (e.g. revaluation, bond referendum) that are - or may become - complicated or controversial, to consider appropriate messaging content, tools, and audiences.
4. Empower the Communications Governance Team to conduct debriefing sessions following important communications events, evaluating both successes and shortcomings, and to make recommendations to the County Manager regarding key communications decisions.
5. Identify and implement a two way communication tool that facilitates meaningful, interactive dialogue among Commissioners and constituents regarding the development and implementation of significant County policies, programs, and activities.
6. Detail the County Manager to assign a responsible party for each essential communication function identified in this Plan; if insufficient resources exist, develop a resourcing plan to be presented to the Board.
7. Establish and foster ongoing working relationships with external communicators (e.g. news, radio, and TV reporters; local bloggers).
8. Develop and implement an awareness program so all County employees can be more effective “ambassadors” for major County policies, programs, and events.
9. Examine the established checklists of potential audiences and available tools and then tailor the release of any major County communication piece to increase the likelihood

that all potentially interested parties will have improved access to the intended message about County programs, policies, and events.

10. Establish a protocol for County communicators to follow so as to determine what information is of sufficient importance to warrant being relayed to all members of the Board of County Commissioners.

PRIORITY B

11. Develop a set of performance measurement tools and task the ongoing Communications Governance Team to conduct an evaluation (at least annually) of Orange County communication efforts.
12. Develop and implement a training program for staff members that are likely to have primary communication responsibilities to audiences outside their departments.
13. Develop and promulgate a formal Orange County Media Relations program.
14. Formally amend this Plan as needed from time-to-time to take immediate advantage of communications “lessons learned” and “best practices” gleaned from Communications Governance Team debriefings.
15. Formally recognize and support the existing ad hoc group relationship among communications professionals in various Orange County public sector agencies.
16. Establish the County’s social media operating philosophy, including social media procedures for use and monitoring of commentary on any interactive format.

PRIORITY C

17. Develop and implement policies to standardize guidance for use of the new County logo and to ensure that the Orange County logo is part of all formal County communications.
18. Develop and implement policies to establish and promote an Orange County “brand”.
19. Establish a protocol to distinguish for target audiences those communications that represent individual Commissioner viewpoints versus those communications that represent the positions of the Board as a whole.
20. Create a pilot program that assigns a non-Commissioner to “live tweet” for BOCC meetings; after a reasonable trial period, have the Communications Governance Team evaluate the costs and benefits and recommend continuation/modification/termination.

APPENDIX A

INVENTORY OF POTENTIAL AUDIENCES

- Residents
- Citizens
- Board of Commissioners
- Taxpayers
- Media
- County departments
- County employees
- Current Businesses/Commercial Enterprises
- Advisory Boards and Commissions
- Real property owners
- Non-English speakers
- People with various disabilities
- People with limited literacy
- Residents with limited or no access to digital communications networks (e.g. no computer or Internet access)
- Visitors
- Potential Future Businesses/Commercial Enterprises
- Potential Future Residents
- Orange County Municipalities
- Adjacent counties
- School districts
- Municipalities in adjacent counties
- Regional organizations or authorities (e.g. TJCOG, Triangle Transit)
- Court system
- UNC-CH
- Public utilities (e.g. Duke Energy, OWASA, Piedmont Electric, PSNC)
- Non-profit service delivery organizations (e.g. InterFaith Council, OCIM, etc)
- Emergency service providers (e.g. volunteer fire departments, Rescue Squad, Red Cross)
- North Carolina governmental agencies
- United States governmental agencies
- Other volunteers

APPENDIX B

INVENTORY OF POTENTIAL TOOLS/ASSETS

- County Website
- County Newsletter (printed, e-mailed)
- Digital Message Monitors
- Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube)
- County Intranet
- County Connection E-Mail
- Citizen Comment (website link for citizen inquiry & complaint with BOCC/departmental follow up)
- Everbridge Alert System
- Annual Report
- News Releases
- Public Forums/Speakers' Bureau
- Brochures, Guide Booklets, and Postcards
- Public Service Announcements
- Calendars/Events
 - Public meetings
 - Public events
 - Classes
- Photography
- Purchased print ads (newspapers and magazines)
- Purchased Radio spots
- Purchased TV spots
- Listservs (allows users to add or remove automatically)
- Dedicated Orange County cable TV channel - Government Access Channel 1301
 - Time Warner Cable
 - AT&T, U-Verse
 - Video programming (currently outsourced)
 - Video tools, hardware and software (cameras, tripods, lights, wireless sound/microphones, video editing software, graphic generator, etc.)
 - Video camera/tools check-out process for departmental staff
- Streaming video
 - BOCC meetings
 - County generated content, public service announcements (PSAs), service highlights, weekly TV show, etc.
- Orange County Government radio station
- Designated employees available for crisis/emergency communications
- Guided tours
- County Government 101 sessions (Citizen Academy)
- Town Hall meetings
- County expo
- Active engagement with other communicators within Orange County (Town of Chapel Hill, Town of Carrboro, Town of Hillsborough, UNC, OWASA, etc.)

- Branding – use of a county wide graphic or logo (indicating this is a service of Orange County provided with your tax dollars)
 - Creating graphics standards (including business cards and stationary)
- Coordinated communicators team of County PIO type staff
- Rich Site Summary (RSS)
- Blogs (County or posting to an independent site such as Orange Politics)
- Monitor Orange County sanctioned social media tools for content and currency
- Membership with regional and national communication organizations
- Employee newsletter
- Yard signs (like small campaign signs)
- Billboard
- Burn/duplicate CD/DVDs of Orange County content for public distribution
- Multimedia
- Newspapers
- Direct Mail
- Special Events
- Translation for any of the above

PLACEHOLDER FOR APPENDIX C
MEDIA RELATIONS POLICY
(to be developed later)