

A MODEL FOR MANAGING RESIDENT PERCEPTIONS

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A client asked me, “What does it take to change the public’s opinion of local government? By every standard this town is providing great services...quality is well above average, and our costs are modest. Independent surveys show our customer service is outstanding. Yes, we have property and sales taxes that support these services, but ours are lower than most in this area. And our efficiency is unparalleled when compared to our peers. What’s it take to make people happy?”

She was waging an uphill battle. As a new manager in a town that went through a divisive council election and severe budget cuts, there were lots of obstacles to overcome. Why did she make public opinion one of her priorities? Two thoughts immediately struck me.

- Citizens usually don’t think about local government unless there is a problem that affects them personally. Their lives are busy with jobs, kids, care for elderly parents, church, PTA, and squeezing a moment into the week just to relax and unwind. Because City government generally operates seamlessly to provide public service, it becomes invisible. No one notices unless something’s wrong or someone is intentionally stirring the pot.
- When local government comes to the public’s attention they paint it with the same broad brush applied to all governments these days. “Government is bloated, excessive, inefficient, self-serving, wasteful, heavy handed, and unnecessary,” the talk show hosts and political pundits say. Guess what? If that’s the only thing people hear (and no one says otherwise) then that’s what they believe.

Intuitively, the new manager knew the power of resident perception on her town's future. Working together we discovered some things cities can do to tell their story.

First, working with staff and elected officials, develop the key points about the city you want folks to remember. These are your "messages." Put them in writing. Test them. Get the elected officials to endorse them.

Next, find alternative ways to deliver those messages to your citizens. Called "vehicles," they include techniques like newspaper articles, bumper stickers, public service announcements (PSA's), speeches by managers and elected officials, utility bill stuffers, the city's website, the sides of public service vehicles, busses and even sanitation trucks, cable TV public access channels, and the most overlooked and effective vehicle of them all...an employee speakers' bureau.

Train everyone associated with the city on those messages. The staff and elected officials should be first, but don't leave the volunteers, part-timers, and board and commission members out of the loop. Everyone affiliated with the city is a candidate for training. These folks constitute the first line of personal communication with residents.

- "Hey Joe, you work for the city. What's up with <issue>?"
- "Sally, you serve on the Planning Commission. Can you tell me about <issue>?"
- "As a volunteer fire fighter you probably know about <issue>, so what's the real story?"

Initially, focus sending these messages to opinion leaders. You might consider bringing the president of the Chamber of Commerce, church pastors, the local school leadership (school board, superintendent, PTA officers, teachers, etc.), and the presidents of the various service clubs into special meetings...call them focus groups...to present information they need about the city, and to hear their opinions. An alternative is to hold a half-day retreat focused on community engagement. Invite opinion leaders to contribute to an action plan for gaining greater transparency into, and awareness of, local

government. Because of the respect you've shown, these leaders will become city advocates.

Finally, if there were legitimate problems in the past, don't expect the city's image to start glowing immediately. It may take an apology, an honest effort to correct errors, and time to redeem the city's image. If the problem is just a simple lack of visibility of the city's virtues, repeating positive messages can do wonders in a short time.

Remember, in these days of flashy advertising, media hype, and the infamous spin doctors, facts are negotiable...but people are willing to "make book" on their perceptions. Take time to manage those public perceptions by identifying the messages you want people to receive, and sending those messages as often, and in as many ways, as possible.

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Bio:

Lance Decker is a business planner whose practice focuses on local governments, community dispute resolution and conflict management. In this capacity Lance helps managers, policy-makers and their constituents find practical pathways into the future. A new product the company is developing, the Manager Performance Assessment System, is ready for release in July 2010 and will address the issues highlighted in this article.

A frequent lecturer and conference speaker, Lance has several publications to his credit and teaches college courses in strategic planning, public involvement and conflict management.