

# RESHAPING THE FUTURE OF COMMUNICATIONS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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**Abstract:** *Understanding the role of communication that the contemporary local authorities establish in a modern society represents the basis for progress and development of local environments. Public relations of local governments and the improvement of communication with different target groups lead to the improvement of local environments. The focus of this thesis will be on the importance of public relations, i.e. on the importance they should have so as to lead to engaging the citizens more, as well as to answer the questions of how and how much the communication established by a local government influences foreign and domestic investments, both currently and in the future.*

**Keywords:** *communication, local government, public relations, the public*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Products and services that suit everyone can be rarely found in this day and age, or rather, it is difficult to claim there is an organization that would choose to communicate in a manner which would satisfy all participants. That is why it is necessary to focus all communication onto its target audience. The concept of a target audience can be observed dually: as a group structure of informal origins or as a relatively independent social space, i.e. a fully-fledged zone, which is institutionally unlimited. The development of efficient communication includes identifying the target audience, setting the goals of communication, creating and designing communication, choosing channels of communication and determining a budget to be used for the purposes of communication [1]. It is desirable that the process of identifying the target audience should begin with a clear idea about what that audience might be potential buyers, current buyers, individuals, groups, certain groups of individuals with similar characteristics, etc. Determining a target audience is crucial for the decision-making process in regard to communication: what is to be said, where it will be said, how it is to be said and who it is to be said to. The desired public relations enable an organization to prepare a strategic document meant for the communication with one or more target audiences. The process of targeting an audience includes three phases:

- segmentation of the surroundings and the public, performed so as to form certain relatively homogenous segments of the public
- the selection of a target audience within the identified segment, which includes the assessment and selection of a group to communicate with

- defining the exact activities that fall under the practice of public relations and instruments to be used in communication [2].

## 2. TARGET AUDIENCES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Depending on whether the goal of a local government is to send a message, notify citizens on its territory about the activities that are to take place, attract investors, influence a change in legislation, or provide reports on their activities, its target audiences can be very diverse. It could even be said that all those audiences, which are typically targeted by some other economic organization, are simultaneously the audiences of local governments. Taking into account the number of functions performed by towns and municipalities, the list of target audiences is quite long:

- banks
- investors
- media
- other local governments
- ministries
- political parties
- primary schools and health centres
- churches
- trade unions
- non-government organizations
- customers
- suppliers
- employees of a local administration
- foreign local governments
- donors
- citizens [3].

The means of communication between the local administration and any of the listed audiences will influence the attitude of the citizens towards the government, the arrival of investments, the establishment of an international cooperation, changes in legislation benefitting the local government and everything in relation to improving the quality of life in the local community. Paying particular attention to each of the segments of the public may lead to successful development of communication strategies in local governments, as well as their progress. Taking into account the relatively small number of persons who work in the area of public relations in local governments, even after the office has already been formed, it cannot be said that each audience receives the necessary attention. This is exactly what leads to frequent misunderstandings between local governments and

their customers, potential investors, and even employees of a local administration.

### 3. INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

For a town and a municipality to function without disturbance, the internal communication of their employees plays one of the crucial roles. The synchronization of numerous activities inside a local government is a prerequisite to, for example, clear the snow off the streets, enable a regular water supply, provide energy stability and heating, allow preschools and health centres to function without issues, etc. Internal organization and internal communication play a particularly essential role in large local governments.

The success of strategic communication is largely dependent on internal communication, the level of compatibility of different groups within the organization, i.e. the unity of the organization. The unity of the organization is accomplished through successful socialization of its employees [4].

Therefore, it is clear to see that internal communication is of vital importance to every organization. Although many practitioners of public relations hold a position that establishing this type of communication is significantly more difficult than external communication, it is quite evident that putting a lot of effort into the communication within an organization is necessary. The instruments and the means used in internal communication nowadays are numerous thanks to the progress and development of modern technologies. Even though new technologies opened up numerous possibilities and means of communication, some local governments in Serbia still prefer to use the old-fashioned means of communication. Naturally, there are those local governments that use new and contemporary instruments of communication for internal communication almost exclusively.

The most frequent forms of internal communication, regardless if it is formal or informal, that can be found in the majority of local governments today, are:

- letters from the mayor or the chief of administration, sent to all employees or particular groups of employees
- notifications that most frequently appear on bulletin boards
- work reports
- bulletins from local governments
- electronic mail
- intranet
- large/small employee gatherings
- visits (as a form of informal communication usually performed by a chief of administration)
- employee trainings
- acknowledgements and employee rewards
- ceremonies [5].

### 4. EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

How a town and a municipality are perceived by the public depends on the success of the external communication of a local government. Those local governments that recognized the importance of communication and public relations had more success in their activities, the political parties in those local environments won the elections (herein mentioned good communication does not neglect the achievement of numerous results that is one of the main prerequisites of winning an election), their economical development was faster compared to others and citizens rated the work of such local governments more favorably, considering them open, transparent and approachable. It is very important to differentiate between informing and communicating, given that these two terms tend to get confused fairly frequently in the practice of public relations in local governments. Informing represents a one-sided delivery of a message through a certain medium or intermediary to the receiver of such message. On the other hand, communication is a two-way process which aims to accomplish a change in attitude and knowledge of citizens in regard to certain social questions.

External communication of local governments is performed on an everyday basis and with all audiences, regardless of the number of audiences that the local government communicates with, and even on a daily basis, most cities and municipalities claim that their primary target audience is the citizenz [6]. The research conducted for the purposes of this paper looks at central authorities, foreign delegations (donors, representatives of the diplomatic corps) and investors. The communication between citizens and a municipal government is realized in different ways, such as: assemblies of citizens or public forums, which are the most direct means of communication, press releases, press conferences, by organizing special events, internet presentations of local authorities, new social media, promotional materials, campaigns, etc. Keeping in mind that the public in a local government is quite diversified, the communication with the public is most frequently realized through the means of electronic and print media or on the internet.

### 5. THE DEGREE OF CITIZENS' AWARENESS IN REGARD TO THE ROLE OF A LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Although the majority of local government employees estimates that their primary role is to keep the citizens informed on a local level, it appears that the majority of citizens is only partially acquainted with the role and function of a local administration [7]. Compared to earlier periods, this result shows significant progress, as there was an ingrained opinion that a local government is practically residue of past communist times. The reason for this can be found in the cultural, political and social heritage of our country. Local governments were, historically, mere administrative centres and supplements to central authorities and political parties for the most part of their existence.

It will take considerable time to change this misconception about local governments, and it is believed that a larger-scale campaign is required so as to acquaint citizens with their workings more closely. This is primarily because only active citizens who participate in creating a local budget, making decisions in relation to a local government, introducing ideas and suggesting solutions can be content citizens who will contribute to the development of local environments.

## 6. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

One of the basic assumptions relating to a successful public relations practice is a strategy of communication with the public. Communication strategies are designed with the intention of helping local governments to efficiently and effectively communicate with their audiences in order to achieve the primary goals of every town and municipality. While deciding on communication strategies, one should pay attention to several things so as to maintain the purpose of their existence. Strategy should include an introduction describing the reasons behind its creation, an overview of the current situation and a situational analysis, such as PEST or SWOT [8]. Aside from that, a good strategy includes clearly formulated goals of a local government and the identification of all stakeholders and target audiences.

The identification of goals and target audiences is followed by the process of defining messages for each of the target audiences, identifying communication methods and instruments, preparing action plans and, finally, deciding on a manner of evaluation so as to establish whether set goals have been achieved [9].

Even though the strategies of local governments are nothing new or unfamiliar, a small number of them has recognized the significance of having a strategic document in communication. Still, the largest number of municipalities has numerous well-developed strategies in different areas (economic development, sustainable development, rural development, etc.). The reason behind this lack of communication strategies can be explained by insufficient human capital in the public relations sector on a local level (whether it refers to a lack of employees, incompetence or a non-existent person or office that would work in public relations).

## 7. THE ACTIVITIES IN RELATION THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN TOWNS AND MUNICIPALITIES

In a research conducted by the *Centre of Modern Skills in local Serbian governments* in 2009, when asked what the activities of employees in the public relations sector are, most respondents gave answers in relation to the preparation of press releases. Immediately after that, a press conference and the organization of special events ensued. According to the same research, the entire list of activities performed by the individuals or groups working in the public relations sector was rated in percentages as following:

- Preparing press releases **13**
- Organizing press conferences **11,2**

- Organizing special events **10,5**
- Website maintenance **9**
- Protocol **8,7**
- Consulting jobs in the management sector **8,2**
- Preparing promotional materials **8,1**
- Internal communication **7,9**
- Preparing bulletins and other informative materials **7,8**
- Press clipping **5,4**
- Planning and realizing campaigns **4**
- Other **2,5** [10]

In terms of instruments and techniques that the public relations experts in local governments use, press releases have an essential role. What is interesting is that, according to this research, social media does not appear on the list of activities. Generally speaking, the public relations issue in local governments keeps improving each year.

### 7.1. Media relations in local governments

The influence of mass-media is indisputable in the social life of a community. Just how much individuals are dependent on the media is perhaps best illustrated by a somewhat extreme attitude that what wasn't in the media didn't actually happen. Not only do they convey the message to the individual, but a lot of today's media creates stances. Speaking of the media in terms of local governments, these include newspapers, magazines, internet, radio and television. Acknowledging the significance and the role of the media, what happens in practice is that local governments frequently see the activities tied to media relations and public relations as interchangeable [10]. Be that as it may, media relations represent a gathering of activities within public relations, meant to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relations between an organization and representatives of various media outlets in a planned, organized and continuous manner. The primary goal of this function is to create positive publicity, as well as a specific form of communication with all target audiences of an organization.

### 7.2. Press conferences

It may be stated that a press conference is one of the more demanding techniques for establishing media relations. A press conference should include the following order of activities: choosing a date of occurrence, choosing the space in which the conference is to take place and its setup, compiling and updating a list of journalists, preparing the script of the conference, preparing questions and answers, inviting journalists, confirming the attendance of journalists, the rehearsal and the shoot [11].

The number and the frequency of press conferences in local governments in Serbia varies to such an extent that it is difficult to find the common denominator. Also, the reasons for organizing press conferences can be very diverse. For the purposes of this paper, a certain generalization had to be made in order to draw the following conclusions: press conferences are organized when the information that is to be

communicated pertains to all citizens of a certain local government or in cases of crises or extraordinary situations. Press conferences also serve the purpose of showing the local government which results have been achieved or the progress that's been made, as well as to see through the larger-scale activities that are in the works (such as infrastructural projects).

All local media is invited to a press conference. There is almost no discrimination among local media. Aside from that, an invitation to a press conference is often directed at media correspondents with national coverage. Most of the time, places in which press conferences are held are municipal buildings or city halls. The atmosphere at a press conference in a local government is usually friendly and not strictly formal, due to a years-long cooperation.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Local government communications are in constant evolution, with new problems arising. A commitment to share and learn is essential, which can be achieved by reshaping internal and external communications. Local governments should have a particular attention to enhancing the quality, effectiveness and impact of local government development cooperation to have a positive local impact on the strengthening of institutional capacities of local governments.

Experience shows that a much greater impact on reshaping the future of local government communication can be achieved when the communication involves a grouping of local governments, coordinated in a network or programme, with an agreed set of demand-driven public development objectives [12].

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