

Interpreting Intent and Applying Policies: Communication

The City continues to make a considerable investment in information assets generated within City government as well as externally. It makes information available to not only City officials, but also many other interested stakeholders. Ontario's pride in its civic identity and Vision comes across in all information the City communicates. Anything the City produces or responds to through its communication network is expected to manifest this pride. This commitment to professional quality written, oral and visual communication is crucial as Ontario adapts to the constantly changing ways in which information is processed by end-users. It makes information available in appealing and useful ways regardless of the medium of delivery. The Ontario Plan website is a prime example of how Ontario capitalizes on changes in communication technology and trends in order to improve delivery of service to its citizens and maintain a competitive advantage.

It is important to recognize, as the City does, that there is a vast difference between communication and information. Communication is two-way and therefore requires an appreciation and understanding for the needs of all parties to the communication system. Ease of feedback and mutual respect among end-users and information generators are essential characteristics to be sustained.

In the absence of this reciprocal nature, communication is at best merely information.

Here are several considerations:

1. **End-User.** The first thing that Ontario's communication culture calls for on the part of any author is an understanding of the audience. That is the basic "need definition" to be used in framing what is to be conveyed, the best format(s) to use, and the most effective means of interaction between the City and the end-user. This may suggest more than one version of the material at hand if there are multiple audiences that do not share common levels of information need.
2. **Transparency.** Communication should enlighten government processes, such as City decision-making, can be understood by those who will be affected by it.
3. **Medium.** Communications are not just a transfer of information; they are a source of intelligence. So the design of communications must be based on knowing what understanding and insights are desired. This has an important impact on the type of medium to be used. For example, graphic presentations may communicate much more effectively on certain topics than written form, enabling the end-user to grasp immediately the direct information and its relationships as well.
4. **Limitations of Information.** The degree of accuracy and availability of information, including any conditional limitations, should be explained. It is often more important to understand what one is not being told on a certain subject than what is being stated--and why.

If the information is not known or not shared or its accuracy limited, that needs to be stated and explained.

Care needs to be taken by those generating communications to understand and make known the degree of accuracy reflected in what is produced.

5. Privacy. It is essential to be constantly aware of privacy laws and legal limitations on what should be publicly accessible or not. The City rigorously complies with such laws. That principle needs to be broadly understood and respected throughout the City.

6. Support. Even though contemporary communication media offer significant increases in efficiency over past technology, they still require adequate support. This takes several forms: 1) funding through the budget process; 2) competent and currently knowledgeable staffing; 3) cost-effective equipment and systems; and 4) positive leadership and reinforcement.

7. Accountability. Many City departments, the City Council, City advisory bodies and numerous other public and quasi-public agencies produce information and process responses to it. In all cases, it is essential that accountability for quality, timeliness and usability, be maintained. This is the means of improving the level of communication serving the community. While there is no direct public control over the communication activities of private sector parties and governmental organizations other than the City of Ontario, the City expects these parties to also maintain a sense of responsibility and accountability in their communications.

8. Identity. Ontario seeks, in its Vision, to be a prosperous community and a regional leader. Therefore, all communications initiated by the City are expected to maintain a consistent image so that the end-user immediately recognizes the source and has a sense of confidence in the information.

These concepts go beyond principles, rules and procedures. They reflect and demand a commitment to a governance culture in which a vital communication mentality prevails.