

WBCA
COMMUNITY EXCELLENCE

AWARD

Best Practices

NORTH CARIBOO

multi-centre



building communities together





Introduction

A referendum was held on November 15, 2008 to seek voter assent for a new “Multi-Centre” for the North Cariboo. Residents contributing to the North Cariboo Recreation and Parks service were asked to vote on the bylaw authorizing the borrowing required to proceed with the project. The North Cariboo Multi-Centre Task Force was committed to making every effort to ensure residents receive factual and accurate information regarding the project through a comprehensive voter outreach and public information program. To this end, the North Cariboo Multi-Centre Communications Working Group was appointed to lead this process, which allowed for two local governments to work in unison to provide information allowing residents to make a decision based on factual, unbiased information. This process improved public accountability through open and transparent communications and increased awareness of local government. This project was a textbook example of how by working together, these local governments were able to capitalize on improved efficiencies and productivity in a cost-effective manner. Now that this template for communications has been established, the The Cariboo Regional District (CRD) and the City of Quesnel (a member municipality of the CRD) have been able to adapt their strategies for use on other referendums coming forward in 2009, including the Williams Lake fringe fire protection boundary expansion taking place later this year. This template for success has already been recognized by communications practitioners from across Canada at the recent Canadian Public Relations Society Annual Conference and AGM by winning the 2009 National Don Rennie Memorial Award for Excellence in Government Communications.

The Theory

A referendum is an opportunity to gain approval from the public on a certain issue. Too often, it is seen as something that is won and lost. But who is to say that a “Yes” or “No” vote is a win or a loss? Our system of representation is built upon the ideal that people are allowed to have their say in how their affairs are managed. It is not up to government to dictate the direction of that management; it is up to government to carry out that direction.

The CRD's proposal to build a new multi-centre calls for a 2,000-seat NHL-sized arena, 450-seat performing arts theatre and accompanying event and assembly space. The price tag for the project was set at \$30 million, with the decision made to go to referendum for approval to borrow up to \$15 million. This approval would allow the CRD and City to approach senior levels of government for grant funding. The CRD and the City of Quesnel collaborated on this project from the start. The communications strategy process was led by and designed by the City of Quesnel and the CRD's Communications departments.

They felt from the beginning that a real win would be high voter turnout, with people making sound, informed decisions based on accurate and unbiased information provided by their government. The entire communications campaign was based on two major messages:

1. Be informed!
2. Vote!

From those two key messages, they branched out and provided factual information about every aspect of the project; the Multi-Centre Communications Strategy was all about public consultation from the very beginning.

When the CRD established the Multi-Centre Task Force, one of their first objectives was to inform people about the proposal and to get their feedback. A series of seven public meetings, along with many individual stakeholder consultations with user groups, were conducted. In addition, a four-page newsletter was delivered to each residence within the North Cariboo Recreation taxation boundary. This public consultation process helped the Task Force tweak the project and come up with a presentation worthy of going to referendum. In addition, a statistically valid survey of 300 random individuals was completed, providing a baseline for knowledge levels and general attitude towards the project.

Project Summary

The Theory (continued)

This is where the actual referendum communications process began.

The sheer size of the multi-centre project, the associated cost, and parking requirements in a tight downtown space were all issues that needed considering, but had also created serious debate amongst community members. Add to that the beginnings of the current economic slowdown, and there was a lot of apprehension about moving forward with this project.

As a contentious issue, it was determined early on that this was not an issue to try and “ram through” the court of public opinion. It was felt that an honest approach of simply presenting the information in an unbiased manner was the best approach. The communications team didn't overtly hype the obvious benefits of this new building. They played down the potential economic benefits to the community. They didn't use any messaging that relied upon tried and true inspirational messages, such as “Your Project, Your Future, Your Choice.” And, perhaps most importantly, the entire team believed in this approach. They lived and breathed the ideal that they were simply providing the information for people to make the decision that was right for them. As they weren't trying to “sell something”, they were well-received by the vast majority of the public that they encountered, both by those in favour of and those opposed to the project.

The communications team didn't neglect their own staff either. The current rink employees and the front-end customer service people for both the City of Quesnel and the CRD were all briefed throughout the process. They knew that people would approach their staff and ask them what they thought. And as employees, they wanted to make sure they had accurate information to provide to residents. This created a sense of inclusiveness for their staff; they were a real part of the process and were involved in the project. And, from an internal communications perspective, all co-workers were part of “the team.”

The Budget

The Working Group was given a budget of \$50,000. Components of the communications strategy included the following:

- Staff time – research and implementation
- Consulting - \$5,000
- Surveys - \$15,000
- Mailout - \$4,500
- Advertising - \$7,500 (not including statutory advertising)
- Fact Sheet – staff time (development)
- Backgrounder - staff time (development)
- FAQs - staff time (development)
- Voter/Media kit - staff time (development)
- Speaking points/Key message points – staff time (development)
- News Releases/Backgrounders – staff time (development)
- E-mail blasts – staff time (development, monitoring list, compiling information)
- Community displays - \$3,000
- PowerPoint presentation – staff time (development)

By undertaking most of these initiatives in-house between the two local government staff members, substantial savings were realized, translating into the project coming in at \$15,000 under budget, once again, demonstrating improved efficiency, productivity and cost-effectiveness.

The Communications Plan

Vision and Mandate of the Communications Working Group

The Working Group designed, developed and implemented all facets of the Multi-Centre Communications Strategy to ensure voters were enabled to make an informed decision on referendum day.

Functions of the Working Group

- The primary functions of the Working Group included:
- Ensuring effective communication took place, both internally and externally, during the lead up to the referendum.
- Acting as a conduit for members of the public seeking more information about the project, process etc.
- Working proactively with the media to ensure consistency and accuracy of reporting of facts around the Multi-Centre project.
- Working with various stakeholder groups and encouraging dialogue between them and the Task Force during the process.

Communications Plan Purpose and Objectives

This plan guided the Communications Working Group and the Multi-Centre Task Force through the process leading to the referendum. It was designed to:

- Ensure information and messages were consistent, coordinated and accurate.
- Ensure information and messages were distributed internally and externally in an efficient manner.
- Increase voter awareness of the project to at least 65%.
- Make sure more than 50% of people had enough information to make an informed decision.
- See the number of those who will definitely vote climb to a minimum of 50%.

Approach

The Communications program was not designed to elicit a voter response either for or against the proposal; rather, it was designed to ensure that voters could make an informed decision on referendum day.

Key Audiences

- Citizens of the North Cariboo living within the NCRP boundary
- Key stakeholders
- Quesnel and regional media outlets
- City and CRD employees
- City and CRD elected officials

Messaging

- Information about the project (cost, location, scope etc) – Be Informed!
- Make sure you vote.
- Project cost/taxation implications.
- Parking/traffic concerns.
- Location of the proposed facility.
- Why this project is being proposed.
- The process leading up to the referendum.
- The “design-build” procurement process.
- Responses to significant issues that arise.

The Communications Plan (continued)

Phase I: Planning

The Communications Plan allowed time for planning before the majority of implementation occurred. A significant amount of time was spent on community consultation.

During this phase a number of initiatives were put into motion including:

Communications Working Group startup

- Members began meeting as soon as the week of April 28, 2008.

Research

- Evaluation of communication materials and tools that had been used by the Multi-Centre Task Force in the past.
- Evaluation of the consultation process.
- Evaluation of prior media coverage and opinion pieces (including letters to the editor).
- Developed and approved budget and timelines (Appendix A).

Analysis

- Summarize results of above.
- Re-affirm key issues and concerns that are to be addressed.
- This information will lead towards the development of the public outreach component of the plan.
- Assess past communications and determine strengths and weaknesses.

Communications Planning

- Developed the objectives and priorities of the public outreach component.
- Developed the key messages.
- Developed the tools to be used to enhance the delivery of key messages.
- Developed strategies for delivering those messages and the accompanying information to the key audiences.
- Developed communications protocol.
- Developed advertising campaign.

Evaluation

- Determine measurement techniques to evaluate public outreach program (media tracking, correspondence etc).

Phase II: Implementation

At this stage a variety of materials and strategies were deployed to ensure the public had all the information needed to make an informed decision come referendum day.

Message Delivery

- The Communications Working group began delivery of messages to the community.

Measurement/Adjustment

- Continued assessing the program and its effectiveness throughout its implementation.
- Developed adjustments/enhancements to the program as required.
- Conducted second statistically valid survey roughly one month prior to the referendum gauging the mood in the community and identifying any potential knowledge gaps.

Concluding Remarks

The North Cariboo Multi-Centre communications strategy was a tremendously successful project from all aspects and for all involved. Not only was it an excellent example of what can be achieved by municipalities and regional districts working in collaboration, but it has developed a tool for future events that can be adopted and adapted by all local governments in BC. No matter the scope of an event, the strategy can be customized to use in its entirety or as a menu of separate components depending on the size of the event and the needs of the community.

Through this process, the Cariboo Regional District and the City of Quesnel gained favourable ground with the electorate as the strategy showed open and transparent leadership and allowed for an increase in knowledge by the voter of their local governments and how they work independently and collectively.

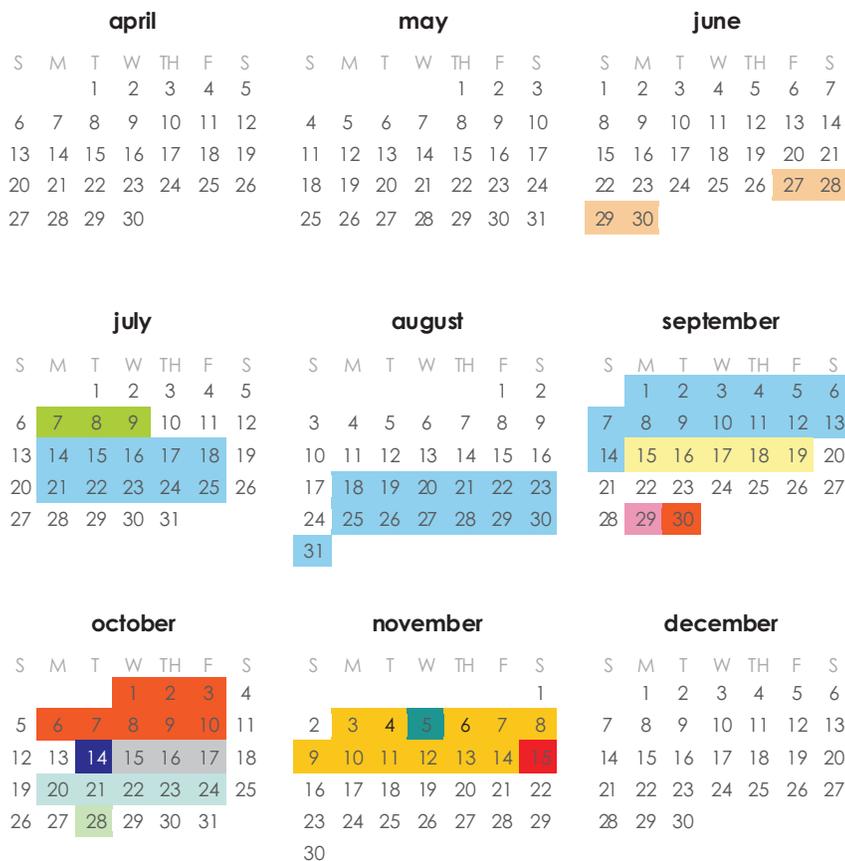
The referendum was not about winning or losing – it was about making sure that the effected taxpayers received the information that would allow them to make a decision about the proposed North Cariboo Multi-Centre that was right for them.

For these reasons, and that it has already been identified and adopted by other government and private sector communicators across the country, the North Cariboo Multi-Centre is worthy of selection as the UBCM Best Practices Award for 2009.

Appendix A - Timelines

A referendum will be held on November 15, 2008 to seek voter assent for a new Multi-Centre. The Multi-Centre Task Force is committed to making every effort to ensure residents receive factual and accurate information regarding the project through a comprehensive voter outreach and public information program.

Project	START DATE	END DATE
Develop document templates and text	JUNE 27	JULY 4
Develop mailout/FAQ/background materials	JULY 7	JULY 9
Ad Campaign No. 1 – FAQs/general information	AUGUST 18	SEPT. 19
Mailout developed/ to printer	SEPT. 15	SEPT. 19
Ad campaign No. 2 re: mailout and survey	SEPT. 29	OCT. 10
Second Survey	OCT. 15	OCT. 17
Refocus of messages based on survey/input	OCT. 20	OCT. 24
Ad campaign No. 3 – make sure you vote/last minute messages	NOV. 3	NOV. 14
Events		
Mailout distributed	SEPT. 29	
Open House No. 1	OCT. 28	
Final report to JPC summarizing information campaign	OCT. 14	
Open House No. 2	NOV. 5	
Referendum	NOV.15	



Appendix B - Communications Tools

1. **Survey** - A statistically valid survey reveals the pulse of the community regarding a specific project. A survey of 300 people represents the opinion of the greater public within 5.5%, 19 times out of 20. A baseline survey has been completed, identifying real or perceived weaknesses in the project. This would be followed by a survey roughly one month prior to the referendum to gauge the community's mood.
2. **Mailout** - At least one, four-page, full-colour mailout describing the proposal and the referendum process is mailed to every home and business within the North Cariboo Recreation and Parks Boundary.
3. **Advertising** - A stream of advertising in various media is placed to ensure visibility of the proposal and the referendum process. Print, television and radio advertising are all utilized.
4. **Fact Sheet** - A one-page printout that provides basic information in bullet form. An easy reference tool for the public, staff, Working Group and elected officials.
5. **Backgrounder** - A one-page printout that describes the project's history, progress to date and basic key information.
6. **FAQs** - A one-page printout that lists frequently asked questions and the answers to them, incorporating key information and key messages.
7. **Voter/Media kit** - A package of information containing the mailout, backgrounder, Fact Sheet, FAQs and any other pertinent documents compiled for pick-up at City Hall, CRD offices and other publicly owned facilities.
8. **Speaking points/Key message points** - A document with key points on specific items/issues. Designed specifically for spokespeople to refer to during media interviews, briefings and public presentations.
9. **News Releases/Backgrounders** - Often used as the launching point for any key message or information dissemination. They become part of the growing media and voter kits, and are posted on the website for the community to reference.
10. **E-mail blasts** - A way of keeping people up to date on progress – a digital mailing list. A template is developed with key messages, dates, etc. with an area reserved for new information each time it is sent. People can subscribe and unsubscribe via the website or conventional e-mail.
11. **PowerPoint presentation** - Designed for community meetings, presentations to service clubs, organizations etc. The PowerPoint outlines history, key information, messages, FAQ's and referendum information.
12. **Public meetings** - Two public meetings – a presentation followed by an “Open House” format where people can ask questions of elected officials and staff on a one-on-one basis.
13. **Employee Briefings** - City and CRD employees will be asked by their neighbours and associates about the information and the issues, so it is vital that employees be well informed.
14. **Static Displays** - A large foam board with key messages and basic information was set up at the arena, recreation centre and other facilities. These would serve as basic reminders of the proposal and be kept in high-traffic areas.

Appendix C - Communications Plan Evaluation

The CRD and City of Quesnel view the results of their efforts over the five-month period ending November 15, 2008 as nothing but a success. Voter turnout was high, knowledge was increased, and negative feedback about the public communications process was nil.

Voter turnout

Voter turnout at this referendum was high. It was determined by the elected officials that they should hold the referendum at the same time as the general election. This not only increased the project's visibility, but it saved money for the local taxpayers. In the most recent referendum held by the CRD, 1,348 voters cast their ballots. In the most recent referendum held by the City, that number was 2,237. For this referendum, 1,879 Regional District (rural residents) voters participated, an increase of 39% over their last referendum. City voters accounted for 3,411, 52% more than their last referendum. Clearly there was a demonstrated interest in this project, created in part by the intensive public outreach efforts.

Voter knowledge

When the Multi-Centre Task Force commissioned its first public opinion survey in December 2007, there were some significant knowledge gaps regarding both information about the project, and even that the project was happening at all. At the end of the referendum communication process, the communications team had seen some significant and promising changes that met or exceeded their objectives. What the team found most interesting was the thirst for knowledge. Often we are able to stick to the "keep to the basics" rules of messaging, but in this instance, people wanted more. If a dollar figure regarding taxation was provided, they wanted a detailed breakdown. If a bulk number of parking spots were talked about, they wanted to read the independent study done on parking. It was refreshing to see this level of interest in a local government project. Some of the survey results the communications team took pride in included:

Do you have enough information?

In December 2007, the Yes response was just 32% of respondents. By the second survey, that number jumped to 58%, a 26-point increase achieved in essentially six weeks. By following up on the survey and reinforcing the information requested by respondents to the second survey, the team feels that number probably jumped again by the time the referendum date came, but they do not have data to support this.

Are you aware of the referendum?

Again, significant gains were made in this area. In December 2007, just 49% were aware of the referendum. By the second survey date, that number had jumped to 69%, a 20-point difference.

How likely are you to vote?

Voter participation is an issue with which governments struggle. We are all aware of falling numbers of people who vote. However, the number of those who would definitely vote climbed from 43% to 50 %.

The best part of conducting the baseline and finish line surveys was that it allowed the team to devise some last-minute messages in areas where they had not provided enough information. This last-minute blitz was seen as an honest response to some of the concerns and questions the public had.

While the media jumped on the question about whether the referendum would pass (the bulge between Yes and No went from 30 points in December 2007 to 15 points by October 2008), they also relayed the communications team's messages about being informed and voting. The team couldn't expect them to ignore that support for the project had lapsed, but they were pleased that the media also reported the statistics important to them: awareness, likelihood of voting, and general project knowledge.

Media coverage

The local media were very supportive. They, too, appreciated what the CRD and City of Quesnel were trying to accomplish and facilitated their efforts. In fact, in several instances, there was such a good level of trust between the various parties that they would reproduce some of the Frequently Asked Questions, Fact Sheets, and Backgrounders, word for word and at no charge. They used it as editorial copy, which was extremely helpful— it lent credence in the public eye as to what the team was trying to do. Inform and educate, not coerce or manipulate.

The communications team worked closely with their local television and radio station personnel, who provided them with not only responsible editorial coverage, but paid advertising at outstanding rates as well.



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