Town of Stratford

Communications Guide

Town of

Stratford

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Imagine that!

Table of Contents

Introduction: About this Guide

This Communications Guide has been designed for Town of Stratford employees and council who take on the responsibility of communicating with the public for any reason. The aim of this document is to provide guidance on and insight into the steps required to develop highly effective communications.

This Guide is meant to serve as a companion to the Town of Stratford's Social Media Engagement Policy and the Town of Stratford's Engagement Guide.

1.   Communicate

1.1 Know your audience

No matter what type of writing you do, the most important question to ask is: who am I writing this for? Is it a message that should be tailored to seniors, young adults, mothers or teenagers?

Knowing who you're writing for is key to developing an effective message – whether it be a media release or a Facebook posting. A large portion of the demographic engaged on Facebook, for example, are women aged 25 – 44. Therefore, you will want to make sure that you're writing with them in mind. For example, a message you write advertising a Youth Can Do Dance on Facebook is likely best tailored to the mother or parent of a youth. If you target your message to youths only, the Town's major demographic may dismiss the posting altogether.

1.2 Design the message

Once you've determined your audience, draft the message in a clear and succinct manner, using short sentences, proper punctuation and grammar. Good writing is written "from me to you." Don't address the message to a group of people – instead, think about writing to one individual who belongs to that larger demographic. This technique helps to make writing more personable and clear.

As always, re-read the message you have crafted. Is it appropriately tailored to your target audience?

Incorporating the Town of Stratford's new key messaging:

Be sure to incorporate the Town of Stratford's new key messaging in every piece you write. When you've drafted a media release, for example, be sure to review it carefully to ensure it captures at least one (or ideally, all) of the Town of Stratford's key messages.

The Town of Stratford's "Positioning Statement" is as follows:

*Stratford, Prince Edward Island is a vibrant, growing, welcoming community where the best of PEI's land and water resources blend with a mix of urban and rural living to create the balanced lifestyle people are looking for and **engaged residents actively share the responsibility of innovative governance with their elected officials** [emphasis added].*

Additionally, three key messages were developed, ***at least one of which should be reflected in all information that is sent out from the Town***. These messages are as follows:

- *The Town of Stratford is building a better community where every person is respected and has the opportunity to reach their full potential. **Imagine that!***

- *The Town of Stratford encourages all members of the community to share their views and ideas to help make Stratford the best possible place to live. **Imagine that!***

- *The Town of Stratford is committed to building a strong local economy, preserving our heritage, celebrating our diverse culture and respecting the natural environment entrusted to us for present and future generations. **Imagine that!***

2. Writing Press/Media Releases

A good press or media release is key to having the organization noticed by the media. A media release is a standardized way of communicating with the media and journalists. If written well, it will tell the media the full story, making their job easier – and therefore making it more likely that that story will be picked up.

What you're writing about must be of interest to a journalist. Therefore, not every piece of information you post on the Town of Stratford's website should be accompanied by a media release. Media releases must be:
- *Newsworthy*
- *New* (i.e., not about something that happened in the past)

Types of information which translate well to a media release:
- Human interest stories
- Opportunities for the public to provide input
- Scheduled events
- Unexpected or commemorative events or activities

The headline of a media release should always be **10 words or less**, and should properly explain what the release is about. A clear and relevant headline is the first step in having your piece picked up by busy media professionals. The title should be

centered and bolded on the page. Only the first letter of the first word (along with other proper nouns, of course) should be capitalized.

A media release's introductory paragraph highlights the five "W's" and an "H": the "who, what, when, where, why and how". This can usually be accomplished in one short sentence.

Typically, the first sentence of the release will close with the phrase: "_____, says [insert name of Mayor or Councillor most closely associated with the initiative]. Please note that, in a formal press release, an elected officials' name should appear here. Minimize mentions of staff, unless the release contains highly technical information that cannot be spoken to by the Mayor or Council. Remember: the media – and residents – want to hear most from elected officials. Be sure to include all key information in this one paragraph.

The next paragraph typically contains a quotation by the above-named official. This, again, makes it easy for the media to pick up the quote and simply run it – without having to contact anyone for a quote to use in their piece.

Following this, usually one more paragraph is required to "flesh out the details" provided in the introductory paragraph. Again, be sure that all information provided is clear, succinct and relevant.

The release always closes by providing a staff (or media) contact, in case the media want to run the story and need to contact you to request more information. If you can point readers to an external (supporting) link (for example, www.earthday.ca for a press release on Stratford's Earth Day celebrations), include it as well.

Please refer to the Town of Stratford's Engagement Guide for a fill in the blank media release template.

3. Writing for Facebook

Facebook is an excellent social platform – used correctly. Have you ever posted something you expected would receive a great deal of commentary, only to be disappointed when it sat idle? Facebook's usability (for local government in particular), depends solely on the poster's ability to spark a conversation.

Creating an effective "Call to Action":

People are twice as likely to comment on a post that poses a question. To drive comments, pose a direct question and ask for a response. This approach can help attract people who like to give their advice, opinions, or ideas. Fill-in-the-blank posts are also extremely popular. They receive a great number of comments.

Many experts recommend instituting a "Call to Action" to readers: for example, by posing a question, asking for an opinion, or by starting a contest. Simply stating a fact sometimes isn't enough to grab a user's attention.

Tips:
- Ask a question
- Provide some information – don't just post a link from the news media without adding some 'Stratford-specific' information. People have likely seen the particular article before, and it's up to you to provide an added 'angle' which will make them want to click on *your* link – not someone else's
- Always provide a link
- Keep it positive
- Provide a striking visual image to catch readers' attention[1]
- Give as many details as you can
- Consider your audience
- Write "from me to you" (to one individual resident – not a group of residents)
- Be engaging, positive, warm and inviting in all interactions
- Be mindful of what time you post a message. Remember that Facebook users are more engaged closer to the end of the work week, and closer to the end of the work day. If possible, schedule a post for the weekend
- Keep variety in your posts
- Consider holding a competition or contest – something as simple as a photography contest is sure to engage any group
- Use it as a "Content Platform" – meaning, anything that is posted to the Town's website or blog should also be posted to Facebook
- Tell your 'fans' what to do
- Increase use of multimedia – such as the use of Flickr, links to YouTube videos, etc.
- And, most importantly – RESPOND in a timely manner, even if the comment or question posed is a critical one. Remember, the Town has the responsibility to address all citizens' concerns in a timely manner. If you don't know the answer, refer the query on to someone who will

Examples:

While Tourism PEI's Facebook page has a slightly different focus, their team uses the most cutting-edge engagement techniques. With over 35,000 "likes", it appears to be a great model. Here are a few of their best posts:

> *Click 'Share' to invite your friends and family! Islanders, tourism businesses and PEI vacationers – let's talk summer!*

> *If you won our PEI Bound contest, what would you do/see first? Enter the contest here: http://utm.to/2fi*

---

[1] Adapted from: http://socialmediatoday.com/jim-belosic/676466/6-tips-writing-facebook-post-perfect-call-action

1. Play a round of golf at The Links at Crowbush Cove
2. Catch and cook your own lobster
3. Take a walk on the red sands of Cavendish Beach

Have you entered our Fall Flavours yet for your chance to win a trip for two to PEI?

Watch this video below for a mouth-watering glimpse of what is in store at this year's Fall Flavours Festival!

Join Celebrity Chef Gordon Bailey September 21st for this new Fall Flavours event set in picturesque Greenwich – PEI National Park. Exquisite cuisine, culture and music featuring Richard Wood will make for an excellent evening!

Looking for a great family fun activity? In celebration of Islander Day, specials are planned at both the province's winter activity parks. Brookvale Winter Activity Park is offering a two-for-one special on all alpine passes and rentals. Mill River Provincial Park has a full day of activities planned for the day. Check it out here: [web address]

Here are a few potential examples of Tweets, based on Tourism PEI's effective "call to action" strategy:

What's your favourite winter activity? If you love to skate, the Town of Stratford is holding a free skate this Saturday at the Pownal Arena from 2 – 4 p.m. Fun for the whole family!

My favourite winter activity is: _____. If you love to skate, the Town of Stratford is holding a free family skate this Saturday at the Pownal Arena from 2 – 4 p.m. Hope to see you there!

Looking for a fun family activity? The Town of Stratford is holding a free family skate this Saturday at the Pownal Arena from 2 – 4 p.m. Hope to see you there!

Click "Share" to invite your friends and family to the Town of Stratford's free family skate this Saturday from 2 – 4 p.m. at the Pownal Arena!

We love to hear from our residents. This Wednesday, the Town of Stratford will be holding its monthly Town Council meeting. We invite all residents to come out and share their views and to receive the latest updates on what's happening in Stratford.

Are you interested in finding out more about Stratford's growing commercial core? Please join us this evening for our Stratford Area Business Mixer at Phinley's Diner from 4 – 6 p.m.

4. Writing for Twitter

The impact and benefits of Twitter are not to be overlooked. Twitter is more specifically known as a "Micro-blogging" tool, and has a very important role in crisis management, marketing promotions, and as a customer/resident service forum. Twitter should be used to promote the Town of Stratford's website and blog, and to announce timely, pertinent information about what's going on in Stratford.

Tips:
- Tweets should be less than 140 characters. That way they can be re-tweeted by others. It is a good idea to aim for 120 characters
- Use a link shortening service to shorten the links you use (bit.ly is the best service but owl.ly works as well)
- Write engaging headlines – think of a tweet like a headline
- Check your links
- Edit your tweets – good grammar is important
- Use relevant hashtags – they are best when used in the middle of the headline, instead of the end (i.e., We're busy gearing up for our annual #smallbiz expo tomorrow)
- Refer to Stratford's website as much as possible
- Link to Facebook / contests / etc.
- Tweet when your users are most engaged. Use a service such as SocialBro or Tweriod to determine when your followers are most engaged and active
- Look for breaking news. Local journalists are constantly scouring Twitter for information. If you get a handle on a story before anyone else (at least on Twitter), or you are among the first to post about it, you'll be one of the main people retweeted. Look for big news stories or even just something interesting. Remember, timeliness is everything[2]
- Mention ("@_____") your more influential followers. If the post is relevant, they will likely want to share it with their own followers

Examples:

Looking to meet others in the Stratford business community? Attend our Business Mixer tonight [bit.ly link]:

Stratford's business community is quickly growing. Attend our Business Mixer tonight from 4-6 at Phinley's Diner.

Stratford's monthly Town Council meeting is tonight at 7:30. Join us! We love to hear from our residents. [bit.ly link]

Looking for something to do on Saturday? Come on out to Stratford's FREE community skate: [bit.ly link]

---

[2] Adapted from: http://www.searchenginejournal.com/6-tips-to-get-retweeted-more-often/48970/.

Stratford's FREE Community Skate will be held this Saturday at the Pownal … see you there!

This month's "Youth Can Do" dance will take place on ____. Hope you can join us!

Happy Holidays to you and yours from Mayor of Stratford David Dunphy and Council: [bit.ly link]

5. Writing for the Website (or the web in general)

Some think of writing for the web as a difficult task. However, the best web-writing is short, succinct and to the point, requiring only simple, paired-down sentences and clear, relevant language. Here are a few tips:

Content must be relevant*.* Ask yourself: does it adhere to Stratford's key goals/brand? Irrelevant and/or frivolous material can make an organization look unprofessional. Leave all irrelevant information out of the piece. Ask yourself at the end of each sentence: is this relevant? Does it adhere to one of Stratford's key messages?

State your conclusion at the beginning*.* Why is the piece being written? What 'end' are you aiming to achieve?

Write clear, short sentences*.* Avoid jargon, acronyms and slang. Write as if you're writing for someone at any level of education.

Use only one idea per paragraph*.* Online readers want to absorb as much information in as little time as possible. Chances are if a reader has to scroll down the page to read an article, they'll quickly lose interest.

Avoid the passive voice*.* Use action words as much as possible.

Use sub-headings and bolded text whenever possible*.* This helps break up the text for busy readers who are looking for very specific information.

And, ***always proof-read your work****!* Try typing out your message in document-editing software such as Word or WordPerfect. This allows you to spell-check. Reading the piece aloud is also a great way to catch errors.

Keep headlines short – (6-8 words) and on one line. Of these 6-8 words, use as many 'keywords' as possible to ensure Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Remember, the words you choose as your headline should be words that a resident may enter into a search engine like Google, for example. Take some time to think about whether your headline might match the words that someone may type into a search engine.

Less is more. In the online world, less is always more. Write your copy for the impatient online reader. Here are some guidelines for the length of your content:
- Headings: 8 words or less
- Sentences: 15 – 20 words
- Paragraphs: 40 – 70 words
- Page word count: 250+ words

Eliminate pompous words and fancy phrases. Effective online writing is not about impressing the reader with your extensive vocabulary. It's about communicating. Use short, simple words. Get to the point. And then stop.

Create effective headlines. The heading is the most important piece of content you'll write. That's because:
1. Internet users scan the page when they read and the first thing they read is your headline. If it doesn't grab their attention, they'll leave.
2. An effective headline can be used to maximize SEO.
3. The headline can be placed on your home page as a link to content.

When writing headlines:
- Avoid the use of adjectives and prepositions (and, a, the, of).
- Be clear and concise. Avoid wordy, wishy-washy phrases.

Write effective summaries, sentences and paragraphs. An effective summary is who, what, when, where and how. It's about getting the information across in 50 words or less. Keep your summaries short and factual. Make sure they encourage your reader to keep reading.

Please refer to the Town of Stratford's Engagement Guide for a fill in the blank website posting template.

6. Writing Informational E-mails

The same rules of brevity and clarity apply when drafting informational e-mails to be sent to residents and other stakeholders. People receive many e-mails in the run of a day; be sure that yours is the one that catches their eye.
Here are a few tips to consider when writing an effective e-mail message:

- *Always create a draft*. This is best accomplished through the use of a word processing program such as Word. Take some time to consider the message you aim to deliver. Writing the message out in a draft format gives you an opportunity to carefully consider and review the drafted message to ensure it meets your objective(s).

- ***Choose an enticing subject line***. Think of a subject line like a headline: use as few words as possible, but choose them wisely. The more captivating your subject line is, the more likely it is that the message will be read. The subject line should be a succinct summary of the e-mail's contents. The subject line is often best left for the end, once the message has been drafted.
- ***Keep it brief***. The greater the length, the less likely the e-mail is to be read.
- ***Remember the "five 'w's' and an 'h'"***: who, what, when, where, why and how. This information should all be contained within the first paragraph of the email.
- ***Break the message into paragraphs***. If more than one paragraph is required, be sure to break the e-mail into short, readable paragraphs. The most pertinent information should always appear in the first paragraph. Supplementary (aka: "nice to know") information should appear in the remaining paragraphs.
- ***Be mindful of the number of e-mails being sent out***. Try not to 'spam' your recipients. This can be accomplished by accumulating information and sending one e-mail out per week, for example, as opposed to sending out one smaller message every other day.
- ***E-mails are not the best forum for high level information***. Because people receive so many e-mails in the course of a day, they are unlikely to take the time to read highly detailed/complex information via e-mail, and your message may miss the mark.

Please refer to the Town of Stratford's Engagement Guide for a fill in the blank e-mail distribution template.

7. Drafting Messages for the Town Signboard

When drafting messages for the Town signboard, be sure to include only the most key elements. Space is extremely limited, and many motorists will not have the time to read a lengthy/complex message. Ensure that you include the date, time, and venue, as well as contact information. Timing is also important: you should plan ahead to be sure you don't post the information either too early or too late.