

2010 MEDIA CONTACT SURVEY

Town of Cary, North Carolina

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INTRODUCTION

Mass media can affect citizen perception of local government in ways typically unmatched by the local government itself. Since local governments do not have the resources to so totally pervade citizen opinion, and because once created, opinion is difficult to change, it is imperative that local governments find ways to work effectively with the media: both traditional (print, television, and radio) and new (including reporter's blogs, media forums, and citizen e-journals).

The Town of Cary takes a positive, proactive approach to media relations, working each day to enhance the partnership as a means of ensuring that accurate and timely information about Town government is disseminated to its citizenry. In July 1997, the Town launched a comprehensive, strategic communications program, much of it devoted to media relations. As part of that effort, Cary's annual Media Contact Survey, first distributed in 1999, was designed to help evaluate the performance of the Town in its partnership with local, national, and international media and give the Town insight into ways to enhance those relationships.

METHODOLOGY

Designed by the Public Information Officer, the Town of Cary's short survey (see *Appendix*) asks media to evaluate Town staff's skills and techniques as they relate to the curricula of the Town's Basic Media Relations, Media Relations Refresher, and Media Relations for Public Safety Staff classes. The survey also asks media to identify and evaluate specific information vehicles used by the Town to disseminate information.

For the first time, the survey was conducted using INgage, a Web-based survey tool. On March 16, 2010, an e-mail was sent to all regional media representatives who worked with Town staff over the last year. The media representatives were advised of the activation of the Web survey and asked to complete the survey as soon as possible. Responses were collected through March 31, 2010. Two additional follow-up e-mail reminders were sent before the survey closed.

RESULTS

Of the 82 media representatives asked to participate, 15 surveys were completed, yielding a response rate of 18.3% (see *Appendix* for Results Tables). This is below last year's response rate of 19%.

DEMOGRAPHICS

This year, responses came from four sources – print, television, radio and Internet. The majority are editors and managers followed by reporters, and more than half have been in the Triangle market for more than five years.

MEDIUM				
	Television	Print	Radio	Internet*
1999	69%	19%	9%	3%
2000	43%	43%	7%	7%
2001	41%	47%	12%	0%
2002	43%	43%	14%	0%
2003	43%	57%	0%	0%
2004	67%	22%	11%	0%
2005	62%	38%	0%	0%
2006	46%	43%	7%	4%
2007	43%	29%	29%	0%
2008	48%	48%	4%	0%
2009	53%	42%	0%	5.3%
2010	50%	22%	11%	17%

*This category was previously named "Wire" and included Internet respondents.

POSITION				
	Reporter	Editors/Manager	Technician	Other
1999	65%	19%	9%	7%
2000	57%	36%	0%	7%
2001	65%	12%	6%	17%
2002	64%	21%	7%	7%
2003	57%	43%	0%	0%
2004	63%	37%	0%	0%
2005	67%	33%	0%	0%
2006	48%	35%	4%	14%
2007	36%	57%	0%	7%
2008	52%	43%	4%	0%
2009	47%	37%	0%	16%
2010	27%	67%	6%	N/A

EXPERIENCE			
	Yrs. In Media	Yrs. In Triangle Market	Here One Yr. Or less
1999	72% for 12 yrs. or less	77% for 7 yrs. or less	22%
2000	71% for 12 yrs. or less	79% for 7 yrs. or less	21%
2001	47% for 12 yrs. or less	65% for 7 yrs. or less	35%
2002	57% for 12 yrs. or less	86% for 7 yrs. or less	29%
2003	100% for 12 yrs. or less	71% for 7 yrs. or less	43%
2004	33% for 7 yrs. or less	89% for 7 yrs. or less	11%
2005	20% for 5 yrs. or less	62% for 5 yrs. or less	NA
2006	31% for 5 yrs. or less	68% for 5 yrs. or less	NA
2007	21% for 5 yrs. or less	43% for 5 yrs. or less	NA
2008	13% for 5 yrs. or less	57% for 5 yrs. or less	0%
2009	42% for 5 yrs. or less	53% for 5 yrs. or less	NA
2010	20% for 5 yrs. or less	33% for 5 yrs. or less	0%

STAFF EVALUATIONS

Two sections of the survey ask respondents to evaluate Town staff. The first—reported in the table below—presents a list of 13 positive statements to which respondents are asked to rate their level of agreement on a scale of 1-9 with 9 being the highest level of agreement. For questions that did not apply to their individual experience, respondents were asked to choose NA to indicate not-applicable to them.

MEDIA CUSTOMER SERVICE						
CHARACTERISTIC	2006 % WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE	2007 % WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE	2008 % WHO GAVE A RANKING OF "6" OR HIGHER	2009 % WHO GAVE A RANKING OF "6" OR HIGHER	2010 % WHO GAVE A RANKING OF "6" OR HIGHER	2010 % WHO GAVE THE HIGHEST RANKING, "9"
Accuracy	90%	86%	95%	94%	100%	80%
Courtesy	93%	86%	100%	94%	100%	87%
Professionalism	90%	92%	100%	94%	100%	80%
Timeliness	86%	86%	79%	96%	93%	73%
Accessibility of Information	77%	96%	93%	93%	100%	73%
Fairness	89%	77%	100%	94%	100%	82%
Preparation for Interviews	93%	83%	100%	93%	100%	82%
Pleasantness	89%	92%	100%	88%	100%	92%

Effectiveness of Releases	77%	85%	95%	86%	93%	60%
Timeliness of Releases	95%	79%	85%	75%	79%	43%
Media Skills/Training	90%	90%	92%	94%	93%	60%
Availability	86%	85%	*	87%	100%	73%
Feedback	67%	85%	62%	83%	90%	30%

*This question was omitted from the 2008 survey results and analysis.

COMPARISONS

Respondents were also asked to continue their evaluation by giving an overall rating of Town staff during the last 12 months using a scale of 1-9 with 9 being the best score. For 2010, **100%** of those responding to the question gave staff an excellence-in-service rating of 7 or greater; an improvement over the 89% given last year. And when asked to compare Cary's overall level of customer service to the media against other Triangle governments using the same 1-9 scale, **92%** of respondents gave Town of Cary staff a rating of 7 or greater, an improvement over the 79% in 2009.

INFORMATION VEHICLES

The next section of the survey presents a list of seven communications vehicles regularly used by the Town for external communications. While only news releases, public service announcements, and media advisories are targeted primarily to the media, it is reasonable to assume that all information vehicles could be a source of information for the media. Respondents were asked to record their current use of each information vehicle and to evaluate the vehicle's effectiveness, in both cases using a scale of 1-9 with 9 being the highest or best rating.

The majority of survey respondents utilize news releases, PSA's and advisories as their primary resources for information and they also found this source to be the most effective. Town staff was the second most effective source of information, followed by the Web site.

COMMUNICATION VEHICLES							
	Town Web site	News Releases, PSA's, Advisories	Town Staff	Town Elected Officials	Town Utility Bill Inserts	Town Newspaper Advertising	Town Cable TV Access Channel
2007 <i>USE AT 7-9</i>	50%	64%	79%	57%	14%	14%	21%
2007 <i>EFFECTIVENESS AT 7-9</i>	64%	86%	86%	57%	21%	7%	21%
2008 <i>USE AT 7-9</i>	50%	80%	91%	67%	40%	40%	36%
2008 <i>EFFECTIVENESS AT 7-9</i>	70%	85%	95%	71%	10%	30%	30%
2009 <i>USE AT 7-9</i>	61%	82%	67%	55%	33%	33%	29%
2009 <i>EFFECTIVENESS AT 7-9</i>	69%	91%	81%	67%	13%	50%	40%
2010 <i>USE AT 7-9</i>	31%	64%	53%	21%	0%	0%	7%
2010 <i>EFFECTIVENESS AT 7-9</i>	86%	93%	92%	73%	50%	50%	67%

CONCLUSIONS

For 2010, Town staff received an A (93%) on the average results of the customer service scale. This score is five percentage points higher than last year's percentile score.

Overall, scores increased on the survey. The highest scores were awarded on questions that indicated positive interactions with staff: courtesy (99%), professionalism (98%), fairness (97%), and accuracy (97%). The Town also saw a significant increase in percentage points for staff's availability to media, from 83% in 2009 to 90% in 2010. On every question on the 13-item customer service section, the Town received ratings of 9 from the majority of respondents.

Consistent with those findings, the Town's overall excellence-in-service ratings increased from last year. The Town received high marks for the question that asked whether Town of Cary staff have provided excellent customer service during the previous 12 months, with a rating of A+ given (96%) compared with last year's C+ (79%). Respondents also gave Cary an A (95%) for overall customer service to media compared with other Triangle governments, up from 2009's C+ (79%).

The high customer service ratings this year could be attributed, in part, to the success of the new reporter's orientation, which provides all new reporters with information on the way the Town of Cary does business. In addition, a new "For Members of the Media" section of the Web site was launched in late 2009 to give all reporters and editors a clearer understanding of expectations at crime scenes or when conducting interviews with staff.

On the 13 items considered on the customer service scale, the Town received the lowest percentile on the following questions, which earned ratings below 90 percent:

- News releases and PSAs are timed appropriately for needs – 81%, a decrease from 2009 (82%)
- Staff routinely give feedback about work - 85%, an increase from 2009 (72%)

Both questions received a lowest score of 5 from respondents, with 21% of respondents giving a rating of 5 on the question of timing news releases. However, a majority of respondents, 64%, gave the question the highest marks of 8 and 9.

The results of the timing question is interesting. In the last year, the Town made an effort to send out communications to the media farther in advance in response to comments made by certain niche publications. However, this may not be working well for others in the media. Timing news releases appropriately for all mediums continues to be a challenge for staff, and increased use of the Internet to disseminate news around the clock could increase the demand for the Town to push information to media faster and more often.

The question concerning appropriate feedback for media saw ratings of 5 through 9, with only 10 respondents answering the question (five responded not applicable). Only one respondent gave the lowest score of 5, while the majority gave the question a score of 7 or higher. This seems to indicate that while the Town could step up efforts to offer more feedback, good or bad, to media, most are satisfied with the level of response offered by staff.

Interestingly, the demographics of this year's survey changed with most respondents reporting 11 or more years of experience professionally, 40 percent touting 16 or more years of experience. Sixty-seven percent of respondents have also worked in this market professionally for six or more years, and the same percentage of respondents also work as editors or managers. This may account for the positive increase in scores over last year, when 42 percent of respondents reported having five years or less experience in the business professionally. It may also help explain the desire of professionals now faced with a changing marketplace in the world of media to receive feedback from municipalities to gauge how they move forward.

Moving forward: Areas for Improvement

Garner more responses to the media survey

It's difficult to gauge true opinion with an 18 percent response rate. Moving forward, the media survey will be consistently disseminated during National Sunshine Week and, as part of the week's activities, the Town could host an open house for media to raise the level of interest in the Town's media relations program as it relates to openness and transparency. The survey would then be offered in paper format to fill out at that time and the link distributed via e-mail for those wishing to take the survey later and/or for those unable to attend the open house.

Conduct a focus group

The idea of convening a focus group consisting of 10-15 media representatives has been considered since 2007, and is one that could provide positive insight on the media's needs, particularly in areas such as timing and effectiveness of news releases and feedback. If an open house/media day is held as part of Sunshine Week, volunteers for a focus group could be solicited at that time. Alternatively, a virtual focus group could be established on the Web as oftentimes it's difficult to schedule media representatives for face-to-face meetings.

Use new media to push information to reporters

The Town is now employing social media as part of its communications toolkit, and media are among those following the Town on Twitter. By using this microblogging service, Public Information staff is able to communicate news more frequently, including status updates on emergencies that don't rise to the level of a news release, briefings in advance of a more detailed update, and reminders of events for which a news release has already been issued. Use of this technology began April 1, 2010 and staff should continue to explore ways in which new media can help meet the varying needs of different media.

Create feedback opportunity with media Web section

While the media section of the Town's Web site has been well received for the information it provides, the site does not offer a dedicated mechanism for feedback. The Town should solicit comments from reporters and other media throughout the year by providing a form, survey, or other method of making comments to staff.

Remind staff to provide feedback

When following up with staff after they've conducted an interview, public information should remind staff to follow-up with the reporter to provide feedback. Tips on ways to provide helpful feedback could also be created by Public Information and posted on C-Net. Moreover, Public Information should check-in with staff, by department, at least twice a year to gauge their feelings on the way their events/programs/initiatives or the Town as a whole is being represented in media. This may allow more opportunities to interact with media in a meaningful way, especially if staff feels like news is being incorrectly reported or unfairly slanted.

Given this year's results to the survey, the Town has made great strides in its media relations program, and the training offered to staff has contributed to a positive environment where media feel they have appropriate levels of access to staff and the information they need. As newspapers and other news media face challenges in their changing roles, the Town will need to be responsive to their changing needs and offer feedback on our expectations.

APPENDIX

RESULTS

[2010 Survey and Results Report](#). (PDF)