

City of Salinas

# COMMUNICATION STRATEGY



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# The Mission of the City of Salinas

Like all other City activities, communications are intended to advance the City's mission. That mission, defined by the City Council, is to provide:

1. Economic Diversity and Prosperity
2. A Safe, Livable Community
3. Effective, Sustainable Government
4. Excellent Infrastructure
5. Quality of Life.

## 1. Economic Diversity and Prosperity

"The City of Salinas has a vibrant, diversified and resilient economy and business environment that makes us the first choice for new and existing employers and businesses in the region. Jobs are created that provide residents with well paying, career ladder employment opportunities. Business development is leveraged by the area's many assets."<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Safe, Livable Community

"The police and fire safety systems (staff, facility, equipment, technology) are efficient, effective, and innovative in our City. Our community embodies an attitude of partnership and shared responsibility to look out for one another to reduce crime and improve overall safety of all residents. Our community creates adequate funding for public safety by adopting consistent and predictable funding sources."

## 3. Effective, Sustainable Government

"The City is effective in providing efficient, innovative services. We treat customers with courtesy, dignity, and respect, while responding to requests in a timely, efficient, and responsible manner. The City is committed to fostering civic engagement, volunteerism,

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<sup>1</sup> Salinas City Council Strategic Goals for 2015-16

and building strong strategic partnerships. Resources are allocated effectively and equitably, and fiscal solvency and sustainability are achieved. Enrichment opportunities ensure employee expertise and professionalism.”

## **4. Excellent Infrastructure**

“Salinas enjoys safe roads, streets, and infrastructure systems that are well planned and maintained. Investments are made to protect and maintain the infrastructure in an efficient, cost effective manner. The community participates to identify needs and set priorities.”

## **5. Quality of Life**

“The City is a healthy, vibrant, sustainable community with robust opportunities for recreation, sports, leisure, health, and education. We foster a healthy and dynamic arts community that encompasses every aspect of performing, written, spoken and creative arts. There is a focus on prevention and intervention in our programming. Youth, individuals, families, parents, and the elderly are flourishing. Parks, community centers, libraries, sports facilities, and schools are well utilized. People are integrating physical activities into their daily routines such as walking, biking, running, and hiking. There are special events that highlight the multi-cultural heritage and many assets of the community. There is abundant community pride.”

## **Our Communications Mission**

In support of the overall Mission of the City, the mission of the communications function is to:

1. Inform the Public, as a primary responsibility of a democratic government.
2. Encourage Civic Engagement, to support and promote the democratic process.
3. Support and Advance Equity
4. Advance the City and its Goals
5. Enable Effective Operations.

## **1. Inform the Public**

In a democracy, the public owns all the information generated on its behalf, and should have access to it, with exceptions only for what is protected by law because of privacy or other over-riding concerns. The communications function of the City of Salinas will ensure that all residents have ready access to information, and will help them notice and understand topics of significance, so that they can be effective participants in the democratic process.

## **2. Encourage Civic Engagement**

In addition to providing information, the communications function will help Salinans connect with and work productively with their City government, and participate in the democratic process. This role is especially important as more interaction takes place via media, for example through online discussions, online forums and other tools.

## **3. Support and Advance Equity**

City communications will be conducted so as to ensure that Salinans have equal access to information, services and civic engagement, with attention to the diversity of the population across races, cultures, languages, ages, genders, abilities, occupations and educational levels.

The City recognizes that part of history of the United States, and of the City of Salinas, is a history of unequal participation in our democracy. The nation and the City have long since banned official discrimination, but aspects of the legacy remain in place, often hidden in the form of “implicit bias.”

Implicit bias is the bias that is built into systems, processes and habits. For example, if a public meeting is scheduled at a time and place that is convenient for one group of people, but not for another, it may be an example of implicit bias. The groups will have unequal access — even if no one intended for that to be the case.

In order to help make sure we’re doing all we can to achieve full equity, the City is working with Build Healthy Communities East Salinas and the California Endowment in a collaboration called Governing for Racial Equity. GRE is a process of mutual consultation and learning focused on ensuring that the City works in ways that are equitable for all.

The values of GRE inform our communications mission goal “Support and Advance Equity”. Like the others, that goal guides all of the discussion in this document.

#### **4. Advance the City and its Goals**

Awareness of, support for, and engagement with the City and its goals will be advanced through communications modes such as branding, public relations, social media, and advertising, among others.

#### **5. Enable Effective Operations**

Communications are central to the operation of any organization. The communications function will support and enhance the effective operation of City government, through internal messaging, process design, training, and consulting.



## The City of Salinas Brand

### The Importance of the Brand

We're all familiar with brands, but not everyone really understands what they are and why they're so important. Many people think of brands in terms of names and logos, like those of Apple, Starbucks or Nike. But brand names and logos are analogous to the names and faces of people, while a brand is more like a person's character. Someone's name or face might change, but their character remains the same.



*City of Salinas logo, with slogan*

A brand is:

- The core promise an organization makes — what it can be trusted to deliver — usually expressed in emotional terms.
- The emotions and values associated with it.
- A tribal identity. When people strongly support a brand, they in a sense join a tribe of like-minded people. This is true both for members of the public and for employees.

A brand is not:

- A name
- A logo

- A slogan
- These are expressions of the brand. They could change without necessarily changing the brand.

We might say that Apple, for example, promises to deliver the power to express yourself. The emotions and values associated with it include creativity, fun, youth, beauty and coolness. And there is a tribe of Apple fans and employees who embrace what Apple stands for and who feel a connection with each other.

The United States of America is also a brand. It promises freedom and opportunity. It expresses emotions and values such as strength, courage, equality and fairness. And Americans feel a strong sense of tribal identity based on their shared democratic values.

Brands are critically important to communications, for several reasons:

- **Trust.** This was the original function of a brand, back when food first started to be sold in cans and boxes and people needed to know whether it was safe and high-quality. A good brand lets you know you can trust an organization to deliver what it promises.
- **Simplicity.** A good brand greatly simplifies decision-making: if people know what a brand stands for, and that they can trust it, they don't have to sort through all the possible alternatives. They also have an easier time understanding and remembering messages that come from the organization, if those messages are coherent with the brand's values. When we talk about the American way of doing something, for example, we probably know instantly what that means.
- **Relationship-building.** When people trust a brand, they develop a relationship with it, which ideally becomes more valuable over time for both them and the organization.

In order to communicate effectively about an organization, understanding its brand is probably the most important skill we can have.

If we all know what the City of Salinas promises and what it stands for, we can use that knowledge to guide everything we say or do on behalf of the City, in both our external and internal communications.

## The City's Brand

As just discussed, the brand of the City of Salinas is not just its name or its logo — either of those could change, and the logo has changed over the years.

Following the framework described above, we might define the brand of the City of Salinas like this:

- Core promise: We are building a thriving future for our people, our economy and our land.
- Emotions and Values: Growth, natural beauty, multi-cultural richness, energy, youth.
- Tribal identity: Creative, hard-working people who are growing a better future.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Brand Definition Update**

The definition of the brand offered here is provisional. It is recommended that in 2016, the City should develop and adopt an updated definition of its brand.

## *Protecting the Brand*

Especially because so much of the value of a brand is based on trust, it's very important to protect the brand's integrity.

This means:

- The brand should never be used in a way that goes against the values it represents.
- The visual expressions of the brand — the name, logo, fonts and colors — must not be altered. Displaying the brand identity inconsistently would undermine trust in the quality and professionalism of the organization the brand represents.

## *Brand Style Guide*

The City has a Brand Style Guide, which can be downloaded from the shared Communications folder at:

<https://salinasca.sharepoint.com/sites/communications/Shared%20Documents/Brand>

Following are excerpts.

### ***Some basic suggestions for using the logo***

Don't start with "second hand" copies of the logo file, such as one grabbed from a web site, or scanned in from letterhead. You can contact one of the people below to get original logo files:

AJ Johns, [aj@bootsroad.com](mailto:aj@bootsroad.com)

Elizabeth Olney, [elizabeth.olney@bootsroad.com](mailto:elizabeth.olney@bootsroad.com)

Don't edit or otherwise change the logo. Be sure to keep its shape intact — a common mistake is to squeeze or stretch a logo horizontally or vertically.

Never increase the size of the logo (or any graphic) beyond its default size — for example, if the file you have is 729 pixels wide by 485 pixels high, do not increase the size to more than that in either dimension. The more you increase the size, the blurrier you will make the image.

It's OK to reduce the size, although in all cases the best practice is to use a file that's the right size to begin with, depending on the size at which you need it to display, and the medium you're using, whether it be email, the web, print, or others.

Any of the people listed above, or other people who have professional graphic design skills, can give you advice on all this.

### ***Color Logo***






We suggest you use the color logo only on a white or cream background.

### ***Color Palette***

The colors on the next page are the colors found in the City's logo. Here's a guide to abbreviations used:

1. CMYK means Cyan – Magenta – Yellow – Black. It's the color system used for printing.

2. RGB means Red – Green – Blue. It's the color system used for computers or mobile devices.
3. Hex is short for Hexadecimal. It's the color system used for the web.

	CMYK	RGB	Hex
	73 • 46 • 39 • 10	80 • 114 • 129	507281
	52 • 33 • 74 • 10	127 • 137 • 90	7F895A
	51 • 65 • 49 • 24	114 • 85 • 93	72555D
	23 • 47 • 100 • 4	193 • 136 • 44	C1882C
	15 • 24 • 56 • 0	219 • 188 • 130	DBBC82

## **Fonts**

Although you should always use an official logo file, if for some reason you need to match the fonts of the logo you can use these:

For “SALINAS”: **Futura**

For “RICH IN LAND | RICH IN VALUES”: **Clarendon**

Following are fonts that we suggest for body text or headings in collateral such as brochures or postcards (they’re commonly available on both Windows and Mac computers):

Arial

Myriad Pro

Trebuchet MS

MS Reference Sans Serif

Times New Roman

Georgia

# Effective Communication

## The Importance of Effective Communication

As service providers, communication is essential to our jobs — for some of us, it's most of our jobs.

But communicating is not the same as simply talking: for communication to occur, at least two people have to participate.

*Communication doesn't happen when someone talks. It happens when they're heard.*

If we send a message and it isn't received, understood and remembered, we might as well not have sent it at all.

On the other hand, when our communication is effective, the organization is effective.

*Communication also determines culture:* the way we communicate with each other establishes and reinforces norms. Those norms become the organization's culture. And a strong culture makes for a strong organization. See Communication and Culture.

Following is an explanation of the basic principles of effective communications.

## How to Be Heard

Every day, every one of us is deluged with information, in the form of conversations, phone calls, emails, social media posts, ads, signs, direct mail, bumper stickers and more.

We promptly forget almost all of it.

This is “by design”: in order to store all the information we encounter, our brains would have to be far too big for us to carry them around. So our minds discard most of it, keeping only what seems most important.

This defines the challenge we face as communicators. *Whenever we try to get a message to other people, their brains are working hard to prevent it.*

In order to overcome this challenge, we have to know what causes our minds to let a message in.

## The Primacy of Need

The short answer is *need*.

What our minds pay attention to is what we need, first of all for survival, and then for less urgent priorities after that. Psychologist Abraham Maslow famously identified a hierarchy of human needs:

1. Survival
2. Safety
3. Love/belonging
4. Esteem
5. Self-actualization

That list is a good guide to what will cause people to pay attention to, and remember, a message. In more familiar terms, people are interested in things like safety, money, power, love, sex, food, fame, entertainment, respect, their families and a sense that their life has meaning.

Effective communicators realize that it's not enough simply to present information — it's likely to be discarded almost immediately. Instead, they look for a way to satisfy a need.

This requires *empathy* for the listener. Instead of starting with what you want to tell someone, first put yourself in their place. Imagine what he or she needs, and offer to satisfy that need.

### ***Empathy: Different Audiences Have Different Needs***

If you've ever listened to advertisers or media professionals talk, you may have noticed that they often focus on what they call "target markets" or "audience segments." For example: "working women aged 18 to 35", or "young urban professionals." And if you look at the magazine rack in any grocery store, you'll see how the media are organized to appeal to specific groups, such as home-makers, hunters, car enthusiasts, skateboarders, computer owners, et al.

This is because these professional communicators know that different groups have different needs. If they want to reach people, it won't work to speak the same way to everybody. They need to understand and address each group's specific needs.



Similarly, when communicating with Salinans we need to understand that we're not addressing a single homogeneous group. At a minimum, we need to remember that we have two major language groups: some who prefer to or only speak English and some who prefer to or only speak Spanish. In addition, there are people from many other linguistic and ethnic backgrounds.

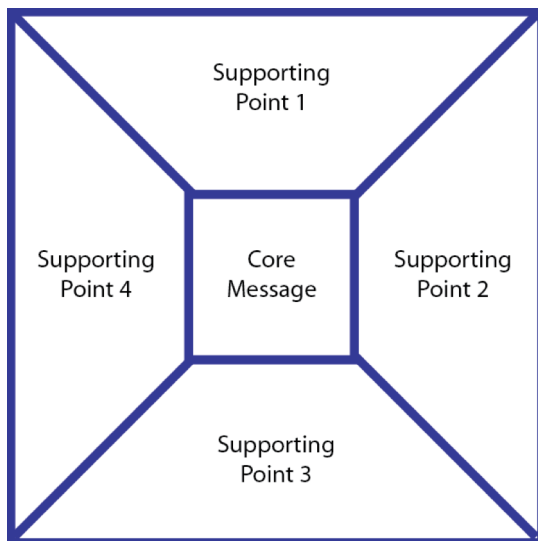
Here are some other ways of looking at the diversity of audiences in Salinas, based on the 2010 U.S. Census:

Population	150,000
Median household income	\$50,587
<i>U.S. median household income</i>	<i>\$53,004</i>
Living in poverty	20.8%
<i>U.S. poverty rate</i>	<i>14.9%</i>
High school or higher	60.0%
<i>U.S. high school or higher</i>	<i>85.7%</i>
Home ownership rate	43.8%
<i>U.S. home ownership rate</i>	<i>65.5%</i>
Hispanic or Latino (any race)	75%
White (any language)	45.0%
Asian	6.3%
African-American	2.0%
Native American	1.3%
Other races	39.2%
Under age 18	31.4%
18-24	12.0%
25-44	29.9%
45-64	19.3%
65 or older	7.5%
Households with children	53.1%
Married opposite-sex couples	59.2%
Unmarried opposite-sex couple	8.1%
Same-sex couple, married or not	0.7%
Female householder	16.9%
Male householder	8.2%

Living alone	17.1%
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## Simplicity: Helping People Understand and Remember

As described above, odds are that everything you say will soon be forgotten. If people do remember anything, it's likely to be only one thing.



So as a rule of thumb, *assume that in any one communication, you can only make one important point, expressed as simply as possible.* Everything else you say should be related to that point — and because it is, some of it may be remembered as well.

It's helpful to use a “message box” to organize your thinking. Write down the one thing you want to be sure people know, and up to three or four major supporting points. In any one message, whether it's a speech, a presentation to City Council, or an email to a colleague, you probably can't expect people to remember much more. The rest will be lumped together as details, to be

looked up later if and when needed. (See more on this under

When and How to Hold a Press Conference.)

### ***A Practical Example: Writing a Good Headline***

To show how all this works, we can use the example of writing a headline, a form of communication that needs to grab people's attention immediately and motivate them to read on.

Figure out why someone would care about your story. Answer this question: What's in it for the reader? Use that answer to write your headline.

Here's a common situation: We're announcing an event: for example, a series of public meetings to inform residents about emergency preparedness. Here's a common way to write a headline for that story:

*City of Salinas to Hold Public Meetings on Emergency Preparedness*

That headline is logical, clear and correct — but it's not very interesting. That's important, because it means we may not draw as many attendees as we could have, which means *we won't do as much good as we could have*.

Put yourself in the reader's place:

- Who cares that it's the City of Salinas that's organizing the meetings?
- Why would I want to go to a meeting? A meeting sounds boring.
- What exactly is "emergency preparedness?" Why do I need to know about it?

Using the above guidelines, we can rewrite the headline about the emergency preparedness meetings:

(a) If we're addressing residents directly:

*With Flood Risk Rising, Learn to Protect Yourself and Your Family*

(b) If we're addressing the media in a press release:

*With Flood Risk Rising, Experts Will Show How to Stay Safe*

These versions present what the reader is likely to care about:

1. There is a rising risk of something that could affect me directly.

2. I want to protect myself, my family, and my property.
3. This is a chance to learn how to do that.

Remember to think about the different audiences we need to reach. For example:

1. Should you provide a Spanish translation?
2. Will someone with less than a high school education understand the language you're using? This is a risk with phrases like "emergency preparedness."
3. In the story that follows the headline, do you need to include an appeal to renters, not just homeowners?

### **RECOMMENDATION: Interpersonal Communication Trainings for All Staff**

Several interviewees stated that just about all staff would benefit from trainings or refreshers in the fundamental skills that support good communication, such as listening, empathy and clarity.

It is recommended that interpersonal communication trainings be offered periodically to all staff, whether or not communication is a core part of their job description.

## **Communications Channels: Meeting the Audience Where They Are**

Empathy for our different audiences includes understanding where and how they receive information. Different groups do that differently.

### ***City Council and Commission Meetings***

These remain the fundamental means for the City to communicate with Salinans, and are important enough to be governed by laws covering notifications, agendas, openness and more. But only a small minority, typically a highly interested one, attends such meetings. We need to make sure that meetings are as useful as possible, and also use other ways to communicate with more people.

**RECOMMENDATION: Presentation Training**

Presentations are useful when they provide meaning and guidance, not just raw facts, in a form that is clear and interesting for the intended audience. Regular training will help make sure that all presentations, whether to a public body or to a small group, meet a consistent standard of quality.

***Media***

Our primary means of reaching Salinans is via the local media. The different media outlets reach different segments of the population, so it's important to connect with all media outlets (English- and Spanish-language, of course) that cover local news and events. The City's Acting Public Information officer maintains an up-to-date local media contacts list, a version of which can be found within the City's email list management software, which as of this writing is Constant Contact. (See more under Media Relations.)

***Email***

The City maintains an opt-in email list of local residents, businesses and organizations, segmented by interests. This allows us to send news directly to those who have chosen to receive it this way. (See more under Email Newsletters.)

***Direct Mail***

Email can often be used as a more economical replacement for direct mail sent through the postal service, but there are still times when direct mail is the better choice. For example, if we need to get information to every household in a neighborhood, we probably won't be able to do that via email.

***Social Media***

The City is currently active on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Vimeo (this last is used to provide video of meetings), with additional social media platforms, such as Instagram, under consideration. Each platform has its own strengths for reaching particular audiences with particular kinds of content. (See more under Social Media.)

## **Websites**

The main City website, and related websites such as those for the Library and Police Department, are important hubs for information, engagement and transactions. Each should be maintained with up-to-date content and monitored for opportunities to communicate with Salinans and to help them get things done, especially in ways that improve our productivity and quality of service. As of this writing the City is building a new website, one that will provide much more support for these priorities.

As part of boosting civic engagement, other modes of communication, such as emails, social media posts or direct mailings, should frequently include links to the website, especially to specific “landing pages” that meet the specific needs of message recipients. Examples are links to a web news item, an event registration form, or an email subscription form.

## **Surveys**

Whether traditional or online, surveys are a valuable tool for learning what the public is thinking, and for inviting them into the democratic process. This is especially important when the City is considering major initiatives, such as a tax measure; when it is seeking to improve service, as with the Permit Center; and as a way of measuring results, by conducting a baseline survey and then comparing it to follow-up survey.

We are able to conduct informal surveys through our email list management software or other online tools such as Survey Monkey. More formal surveys can be conducted by phone and or direct mail, and may require expert services.

## ***Town Hall Meetings, Neighborhood Meetings***

These are effective for presenting topics that people will want to discuss, for example topics that are controversial, unfamiliar or complicated.

## ***Small or Personal Meetings***

As part of the City’s commitment to excellent customer service, some staff, starting with the Mayor, make themselves available for small and personal meetings to discuss matters of high importance to a relative few, or to give people a chance to speak privately. For this purpose, the Police Department has created its Here to Hear / Aquí para escuchar program, which invites people to meet privately with the Chief or other department leader.

## ***Day-to-Day Encounters***

Each day, all City staff encounter members of the public, including their own friends and family. Many of these encounters are opportunities to help people understand and engage with their city government. Each of us is an ambassador.

## **Effective Writing**

There are many ways to learn to be a more effective communicator, including trainings offered to City staff, plus books, courses and websites. A reference worth bookmarking is the U.S. Government's Plain Language Guidelines at [www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov).

For example, here's a checklist for writing clearly:

- ☐ Written for the average reader
- ☐ Organized to serve the reader's needs
- ☐ Has useful headings
- ☐ Uses "you" and other pronouns to speak to the reader
- ☐ Uses active voice
- ☐ Uses short sections and sentences
- ☐ Uses the simplest tense possible — simple present is best
- ☐ Uses base verbs, not nominalizations (hidden verbs)
- ☐ Omits excess words
- ☐ Uses concrete, familiar words
- ☐ Uses "must" to express requirements; avoids the ambiguous word "shall"
- ☐ Places words carefully (avoids large gaps between the subject, the verb and the object; puts exceptions last; places modifiers correctly)
- ☐ Uses lists and tables to simplify complex material
- ☐ Uses no more than two or three subordinate levels.

([www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/checklist.cfm](http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/quickreference/checklist.cfm))

## **Effective Visual Communication**

It used to be that writing was the default mode of communications, while images and video were the province of professional specialists. But increasingly, members of the public prefer visuals. This is often because people have too much information to sort through each day, and visuals communicate a lot of meaning quickly. In some cases, it's because the message recipient speaks a different language, or has low literacy.

This means that even if we aren't now, soon enough most of us will be expected to have basic "visual literacy."

This includes:

- Shooting a quick but effective photo or video on a smart phone or other mobile device.
- Simple editing of photos and videos, such as cropping a photo or trimming a video for length.
- Adding a photo to an email or web post.
- Uploading a photo or video to a social media account or website.

The City offers trainings from time to time in these and other communications skills. There are also many sources of free and low cost training available on the web. One example among many is the free site [instructables.com](http://instructables.com).

Images or video should be used whenever possible. Evidence overwhelmingly shows that visual content is looked at and engaged with by many more people than text-only content.

Bear in mind, though, that some content calls for professional design skills. While a quick smart phone photo or video is usually just fine for a social media post, for example, a more substantive communication, such as an official report, is likely to require professional design.

## **Using Templates**

Whenever a document design is likely to be used frequently, as in the case of stationery, agendas, email newsletters, or website posts, the design should be skillfully designed and embodied in a template.

Templates should be stored in a well-organized, easily findable folder structure on the City intranet.



## **Meta-messages**

For every message we communicate, there is a “meta-message”, that is, a secondary message that’s implied by the way the first one is delivered.

For example, if someone says “I’d love to go to that movie”, a very different meaning is communicated if it comes with an eye-roll. We all send meta-messages through facial expressions; tone of voice; how responsive we are; posture; the way we’re dressed; the appearance of the office; and other ways.

All are opportunities to express and reinforce the values the organization stands for. As an example, consider the impact of a staffer encountering a member of the public entering a City building, holding the door and offering a warm greeting. It’s a small gesture with a powerful impact, sending the meta-message, “We work for you.”

## Internal Communication

Most of the preceding discussion applies as well to internal communications. In particular, remember that communication requires the participation of at least two people:

***Communication doesn't happen when people talk. It happens when they're heard.***

This means that in order to communicate effectively with colleagues, we need to remember:

1. Needs come first
2. Empathy is a communicator's most important skill
3. Different audiences have different needs
4. Simplicity helps people understand and remember
5. Different audiences are reached by different channels.

We should also be aware that **the way we communicate with each other is the way we build and maintain our organizational culture.**

## Communication and Culture

A culture is the set of values and beliefs that defines a particular group of people. It is embodied in communications, in the form of stories and practices.

Until recently, modern organizations have tended to ignore culture, instead hewing to a scientific management model, developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that tended to favor inputs, process and outputs over “softer” concerns such as culture.

More recently, though, management theory has rediscovered the unavoidable fact that organizations are made of people, and groups of people inevitably form cultures, for good or ill. Those organizations that overlook the importance of stories and practices risk missing the chance to build one of the most valuable assets they can have.

For example, consider the following excerpt from a 2011 Harvard Business Review article by management consultant Nilofer Merchant, “Culture Trumps Strategy, Every Time”<sup>2</sup>:

*How we get things done drives performance. These issues of trust, conflict resolution, and co-ownership are foundational for how a team gets work done. Culture is the set of habits that allows a group of people to cooperate by assumption rather than by negotiation. Based on that definition, culture is not what we say, but what we do without asking. A healthy culture allows us to produce something with each other, not in spite of each other. That is how a group of people generates something much bigger than the sum of the individuals involved.*

High-performing organizations have strong cultures, ones that express what the organization stands for. That’s the kind of culture we want to keep at the City of Salinas: one that expresses the values in our mission and brand. This priority informs the discussion that follows.

## Subculture

With culture often comes a subculture. We can predict it with this equation:

$$(\text{SUB})\text{CULTURE} = \text{STATED VALUES} + \text{ACTUAL BEHAVIOR}$$

Where actual behavior — especially by people in positions of authority — expresses the organization’s stated values, the equation returns a positive value: the culture is authentic and healthy. But when actual behavior contradicts the stated values, the result is negative: the official culture is seen as inauthentic, and employees believe instead in a subculture, characterized at best by irony, and at worst by cynicism and mistrust.

## Culture and Conflict

In the Harvard Business Review article cited above, note that “conflict resolution” is included as one of three elements that are “foundational for how a team gets work done.”

Many of us are reared to feel conflict is bad, and to be avoided. But whenever people work together, conflict is inevitable. And in fact some conflict — healthy conflict — is not only not bad, it’s desirable.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://hbr.org/2011/03/culture-trumps-strategy-every>

That's because when people care about their work, they're likely to disagree from time to time about the best way to do it. If they can't have a healthy conflict about it, it's quite likely that good ideas will be lost, along with opportunities to strengthen team bonds through open, honest communication.

What is healthy conflict?

In a nutshell, it's calm, honest, respectful disagreement that's focused on the best way of achieve the objective, not on personalities or personal preferences.

Healthy conflict is not aggressive, and not passive, but *respectfully assertive*.

1. The aggressive response to conflict tries to force others to comply: "Do it my way, or else." Few people like it, though some assume (incorrectly) that it's necessary for getting things done.
2. The passive response is some version of "Whatever you want is fine" or "Just tell me what you want and I'll do it." Sometimes this is seen as being a nice or helpful person, and there are times when what makes the most sense is to just do what we're asked. But there's a risk in being too passive. If people actually have questions or objections and don't raise them, the organization misses out on what could be important information. If they then do their job with a lack of commitment, performance will probably suffer. And if they voice their reservations in ways in complaints to co-workers, morale will suffer as well.
3. The **respectfully assertive** response is along the lines of, "I'd like to suggest something else I think we need to consider." The conversation then explores alternative ways to go forward based on what would work best, not personal issues. Even people who don't like each other for some reason (probably based on a communication problem!) should be able to have productive discussions like this.

Much of the responsibility for healthy conflict resolution lies with managers:

- Managers should maintain an environment in which people feel encouraged to offer their thoughts.
- Everyone should be clear on how, when and where to present questions or disagreements, and be able to trust that they will be heard.
- Once options have been considered and the responsible person has made a decision — and assuming there are no moral, ethical or legal objections — the expectation

should be that everyone will execute that decision to the best of their ability, whether or not it's the course they would have chosen.

When the conflict resolution process is healthy, people feel that decision-making is fair, and are more willing to give their best.

Most of the City staff interviewed reported friendly and collaborative relationships with co-workers. If and when there is unhealthy conflict, professional communications training and facilitation can be very helpful. In addition, such training would probably be beneficial for all new employees.

**RECOMMENDATION: Communication and Conflict Resolution Training**

Because healthy conflict resolution is fundamental to a healthy culture, periodic trainings in communication and conflict resolution should be offered to recently hired employees.

## Communication Tools: What to Use When, and How

As described under Effective Communication, above, it's important to use the channel of communication that is used by your target audience, in the way that they use it.

It's also important to use the channel of communication that best suits the content, significance, intended use and urgency of the message you're sending.

A guiding principle: **surface useful meaning**. Most of our internal communications are about getting things done: following up on residents' needs, organizing work activities, scheduling meetings, reporting on progress, etc. In the course of this, it's easy to mistake quantity for quality, especially under the pressure of time. We might be tempted just to unload volumes of unfiltered information on co-workers, and let them sort it out.

We serve each other (and the public) much better when we *surface useful meaning*. This means distilling and highlighting just what co-workers need to know to move forward, while sparing them unnecessary details or lack of clarity.

As the scholar of strategy Fran P.B. Osinga wrote:

*"Even if one has perfect information it is of no value if it is not coupled to a penetrating understanding of its meaning, if one does not see the patterns. Judgment is key. Without judgment, data means nothing."*<sup>3</sup>

Remember that all your communication through City channels is done in service of the public, and that the great majority is considered a public record.

Following are recommendations for the effective use of different communication channels.

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<sup>3</sup> Frans P.B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007).

## Stories and Practices

These may seem to be unusual choices at the head of a section that will include more standard tools such as email, the phone and meetings. We include them here because stories and practices are the primary means of building and maintaining a culture, and a strong culture makes an effective organization.

Everyone, especially managers, should keep an eye out for stories that express the culture we want, and make a point of telling those stories. This can be as simple as recognizing someone's good work during a department meeting, or sharing a funny story from the past at a group lunch.

Or it might be more formal. During one of our meetings with Police Department staff, an officer mentioned that he felt turnover in the department had led to a loss of shared knowledge of a great heritage:

*When I started, I loved the fact the Salinas PD were the real deal. The guys who had come before me were legends — I just wanted to do everything I could to be like them.*

### **RECOMMENDATION: Strengthening Stories and Practices**

A suggestion that came up in that discussion was that more could be done to celebrate the stories of officers who have embodied the best of the Salinas PD, for example by placing their photos and stories in prominent places through the headquarters, as a constant reminder of what the department values most.

Similarly, existing and new practices can be designed to make sure they give cultural values the importance they deserve. Promotions, retirements, or completions of big projects — all are opportunities to express respect and appreciation for people and for the values they represent. Such expressions are most powerful when they involve actions as well as deeds, and when actions and deeds are thoughtful and sincere. There's a reason we don't just pledge allegiance to the flag, but instead stop what we were doing, turn towards the flag, and place our hands over our hearts.

## Email

### *Strengths*

Email has become the communication backbone of most organizations, including the City of Salinas.

- It's fast and convenient.
- It's asynchronous, meaning that a message can be consumed at a different time from when it was sent. That allows colleagues to coordinate their work even when they aren't available to each other in real time.
- It creates an easily searchable record of conversations and related documents and events.

### *Weaknesses*

1. It is not good for urgent messages.
2. It may not be sufficient for highly important messages, since emails can be overlooked, and so in some cases may require the use of fail-safe measures, such as a request for confirmation of receipt, or a parallel phone call or text message.
3. Not all City staff have equal access to their work email. In the Public Works Department Yard, for example, there are about 10 computers for about 80 staff members, so for some employees, access to work email is sporadic.
4. Different people have different levels of skill in the use of email. Those with lower skill levels unintentionally can generate misunderstandings or inefficiencies.
5. Email can be a source of frequent interruption, and therefore lost productivity. According to UC Irvine Informatics Professor Gloria Mark, it takes an average of 23 minutes for a worker to return to the original task after being interrupted — and that average worker only get 11 minutes between interruptions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress", <https://www.ics.uci.edu/~gmark/chi08-mark.pdf>



## **Good Email Practices**

- Keep messages short, clear and to the point, using the simplest language that gets across your meaning. Ask yourself what information recipients need to do their jobs, and try to avoid burdening them with details they don't really need.
- Highlight important content, especially when it requires action. Place the most important content at the top of the email, and put separate points in separate paragraphs (hopefully not many, in the interests of brevity).
- Make subject lines specific and informative. Given the very high volume of email many people get, it can be very helpful to try to fit your entire message in a subject line, such as "Today's dept. mtg. has been moved to 3 pm" or "Do you have any additions to the report?"
- If you need to cover more than one topic, consider writing separate emails. If a new topic comes up in the middle of a thread, start a new thread for it. If a thread develops on a particular topic and someone introduces a different topic partway through, without starting a new thread, that second discussion will be hard to find in a search for relevant subject lines.
- Don't include people who don't need to be in the discussion. Some people mistake the cc line for a way of reporting their activity to colleagues or a supervisor. Colleagues will benefit more from a summary, delivered in one message, when they need it.
- To avoid lost productivity, establish a system for checking emails based on their true importance. For example:
  - Use your email software to apply a "VIP" alert to a small number of people you know are likely to need a quick reply from you. When an urgent message comes in, look at it as soon as you can.
  - For others, reserve checking and responding to email to two or three set times per day.
  - If your email software notifies you every time a message arrives, you can probably turn that feature off.
- While avoiding distraction, do be responsive to co-workers, members of the public and others who need your attention. Each department should set and follow a standard for the maximum amount of time for a response to an inquiry or request. This maximum will vary according to the needs and expectations of different professions. Email users

should also follow reliable processes for keeping track of emails awaiting a reply or other action. For example:

- Either reply to an email right after reading it or flag it for later follow-up, and establish a habit of checking and acting on flagged emails.
  - When an email includes a request for any significant action by you, create one or more to do items in your to do list, project management tool or ticketing tool. Don't use your email software to track action items.
  - If you notice that people frequently have to check back with you about previous requests, take it as a sign that your email and/or time management skills might need some improvement.
- Avoid any temptation to send "CYA" emails, intended to establish a protective e-trail in case things go wrong later. Since colleagues recognize these for what they are, they usually damage trust more than they build security.
  - Don't cc other people as a way of exerting pressure on the message recipient. For example, if you feel the need to cc someone's boss in order to get results, you have an issue that can't be solved by email. In a culture that supports healthy conflict, it would be addressed directly.
  - Avoid using bcc unless there's a genuine need (for an example, see the next item in this list). In nearly every case, your message recipient has a right to know who else is involved in the conversation. Secretly involving others can be a serious betrayal of trust, and destructive to our culture.
  - Using bcc is a *good* idea when sending to a list of recipients who may not want their email address shared with strangers. In such cases it's polite to indicate that you're copying others, for example, by beginning the email with "Hi all" or "This is a reply to all who expressed interest in..."
  - Avoid using bcc to send messages to long lists of addresses (say more than six or seven). Some email servers will interpret such messages as spam and refuse to deliver them, without alerting the sender. For mass emails, you'll get better delivery rates by using dedicated email list management software, such as Constant Contact, which the City uses.
  - Using all caps should be avoided unless it's clear from the context that you're happy ("CONGRATULATIONS!"), because usually it indicates shouting ("COME HERE").

- If you're overly terse, it can "sound" like you're unhappy or are being disrespectful. For example, consider the difference between "Go to the office and get the report" and "Would you be able to go to the office to get the report?" It's a little less efficient in word count, but a lot more efficient in maintaining a happy and healthy culture.
- Check the size of email attachments, especially if they're images or videos, as very large files may not be delivered. If you need to share a large file, you can upload it to a shared folder in the Office 365 OneDrive and send your recipient the link.
- If you're going to be away from work, set up an informative auto response that says when you'll be back and how people can get help in the meantime. Remember to set an expiry date, or manually turn it off when you return.

## Phone

### Strengths

The phone is a good choice when:

- You need a quick answer
- When a topic will require discussion that would take too long via email
- When tone of voice is important, since tone is hard to communicate with email and on sensitive subjects it can be misconstrued.

### Weaknesses

- A phone call is more interruptive than an email. If the matter isn't urgent, consider sending an email or, if you can, sending your phone message directly to voice mail.
- It's much slower to find and replay voice mails than it is to find and reread emails.
- Voice mails get erased, while emails are preserved.
- Phone systems can be sources of frustration if users are forced to search through complicated sets of extensions, or are bounced from one person to another. Recall our earlier discussion of Meta-messages: this kind of "phone hell" experience is the opposite of what's intended to be customer service.

### **Good Phone Practices**

- Call people when the phone is the right choice, but remember that their time and attention are valuable both to them and to the organization.
- As with emails, keep voice messages short, clear and to the point, using the simplest language that gets across your meaning. Brevity is especially important in voice mail, since recipients can't quickly skim the message for the most important points, the way they can an email.
- Responsiveness is important. As with emails, departments should set an expectation of the maximum time within which a voice mail will either be answered or referred to someone else who can help.
- Never let your voice mailbox fill up — this sends the meta-message that you're unresponsive, or disorganized. Make a habit of deleting old messages so you can be sure never to run out of storage space.
- If you're going to be away from work, leave an informative voice mail greeting that says when you'll be back and how people can get help in the meantime. Remember to update your greeting when you return.

### **Messaging**

Text messaging, SMS and chat provide a useful hybrid of email and phone: they're as immediate as a phone call, but less intrusive.

### **Good Messaging Practices**

- Use messaging when you need a quick reply, but don't need your recipient to devote time and attention to a phone call.
- Because it is somewhat interruptive, think before using messaging for non-urgent messages.
- In shared office settings, chat is a considerate alternative to the phone or in-person conversations, even for communicating with people nearby, as it reduces auditory distraction for office mates.
- Don't use text or SMS messaging if you might need to find and retrieve the message in the future. Chat may be OK, as chat systems may retain messages indefinitely.

## Mobile Devices

Online activity continues to shift way from desktop computers to mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets. The great majority of web browsing now takes place on mobile devices, and much of the communication that used to happen via email now happens via mobile-oriented messaging such as text, SMS or Facebook Messenger. Therefore:

1. In creating content, we need to take care that it will display well on different sized screens.
2. In designing our communications processes, we need to be aware of, and take advantage of, the growing preference for mobile.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Mobile Devices**

Mobile City workers, such as members of Public Works crews, might be better served by being equipped with mobile devices rather than fixed-in-place desktop computers.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Set Minimum Responsiveness Levels; Troubleshoot Bottlenecks**

Although many interviewees reported good responsiveness from City staff, and cited some as outstanding, there were several mentions of bottlenecks, such as long hold times, multiple referrals through phone trees, or staff who can't be reached by voice mail because their mailbox is full.

Given the importance to the efficient functioning of the City, and to the quality of its customer service, it is recommended that department heads set, communicate and review minimum standards for handling requests.

There may be cases in which, because of system or process flaws, staff are ill-equipped to be as responsive as they want to be. For example:

Those who answer calls from the public may need a more informative guide to where to direct common inquiries, so each inquiry will reach someone who will be able to help quickly.

It might help to designate staff in each department who have a “concierge” role, i.e. who are trained to provide guidance through the complicated organizational structure of the department and the City.

Automated phone systems may need checking to make sure that the recorded messages are clear and helpful, and that it’s easy to reach human assistance when needed.

## Meetings

Meetings often have a bad reputation, but that arises not from their use, but their misuse.

The most common problem with a meeting is that its purpose is not clear — in the worst cases, people show up and talk, and afterwards are not sure why.

But a well-designed meeting is an efficient way for people to share information, generate or review ideas, make decisions, and/or execute tasks that require a group.

### *Guidelines for Effective Meetings*

1. **Have a clear objective.** Don’t meet just because it’s on the schedule. Understand what each meeting is intended to accomplish.
2. **Prepare.** If some work needs to be done before the meeting, be sure to do it. Showing up unprepared ends up wasting time for everyone present.
3. **Invite the right people,** and only those who are needed. If some people are needed only for parts of a meeting, consider having them attend just for those parts.
4. **Stay on topic.** Other topics can be dealt with another time, unless they’re urgent.
5. **Manage the meeting.** One person should take responsibility for keeping the conversation on track and on schedule.
6. **Focus on each other** and use only the technology that’s needed. Unless they’re required for finding information or taking notes, put away laptops and mobile devices. Discourage unnecessary presentations, and encourage direct engagement.
7. **Define action items** and assign responsibility for getting them done.
8. **Follow up.** The meeting manager should take responsibility for making sure that progress made during the meeting doesn’t dissipate, but leads to further progress.

## Video Conferencing

Some interviewees identified a need for more use of video conferencing.

For example, the Fire Department is required to conduct 240 hours of training per year, and video conferencing would enable some of that to be done without requiring staff to lose significant amounts of time to travel. It was also suggested that, by bridging the gap between in-person meetings and less personal modes of communication, video conferencing might help to break down some of the organizational silos that can develop when people work in separate buildings.

### **RECOMMENDATION: More Use of Video Conferencing**

Video conferencing no longer requires expensive equipment or services. In many cases, free or inexpensive services such as Skype or Google Hangouts will work well.

Managers should look at current meeting practices and identify cases where an in-person meeting would be more efficient if replaced by a video conference, or where other interactions, such as conference calls or group emails, might be enhanced by video conferencing.

## Personal and Small-Group Interactions

Many of the most productive communications happen through spontaneous interactions within the work place. Although it's easy to take for granted, a shared workspace is one of an organization's most valuable communication tools.

Our workspaces should be designed to facilitate such interactions, by providing comfortable areas for informal conversations and co-working sessions, while controlling the potential for distraction of other workers.

According to an in-depth Harvard Business review article on the topic, "Workspaces the Move People"<sup>5</sup>:

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<sup>5</sup> <https://hbr.org/2014/10/workspaces-that-move-people>

*We've learned... that face-to-face interactions are by far the most important activity in an office. [Samsung Vice President Scott Birnbaum] is on to something when he talks about getting employees to "collide," because our data suggest that creating collisions—chance encounters and unplanned interactions between knowledge workers, both inside and outside the organization—improves performance.*

Managers can encourage friendly and productive personal communication, especially by modeling it.

Given, though, that the City has multiple departments in multiple buildings, there is a risk of "silos" forming. Many interviewees reported that communication works better within their part of the organization than it does from one part to another. Managers should be aware of this risk and take measures to reduce it.

#### **RECOMMENDATION: Identify and Break Down "Silos"**

Managers, especially those with cross-departmental responsibilities, should take note of gaps in communication and act to bridge them.

This can be as simple as paying regular visits to other buildings, or occasionally checking in by phone, instead of email. In some cases it may require more substantial changes, such as to roles, processes or organization. In all cases it will be important to support and reinforce collaborative values and expectations.

## **Internal News**

An organization is only as strong as its members' ability to communicate. But even though managers may feel they've made good efforts to share information with staff, staff may still report that they don't fully understand what's happening or why. Such a vacuum will be filled by *misunderstanding*, and then managers will need to invest extra effort in responding to errors and rumors.

This is an example of the classic management rule of thumb: it's almost impossible to *over-communicate*.

It's valuable to establish processes for sharing news in addition to the weekly flow of email, messaging, phone calls and meetings.



This may be take the form of a regular newsletter, but doesn't need to — and in fact, less formal means of news-sharing may in some cases yield greater impact and engagement, through being more personal.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Expand the Use of Internal News Sharing**

An investment in “going beyond,” especially one based on a low-overhead process, will probably pay off in better overall performance.

Options include:

- ° “Check-in” meetings, in a space and configuration designed to encourage questions and discussion, such as in a lounge area or off-site.
- ° Office 365's Newsfeed tool, which is like an internal social network. It supports discussions, document sharing and employee blogs.
- ° An email discussion list, i.e. one that supports messages and replies to the group via a single email address (for example, “[discuss@ci.calinas.ca.us](mailto:discuss@ci.calinas.ca.us)”).
- ° Email newsletters.

Via one or another of the above means, department directors might make a habit of sharing with staff their notes from directors meetings.

## **Presentations**

Presentations may have a worse reputation than meetings. But like meetings, they are valuable when well designed and executed.

Although the use of presentation software, such as PowerPoint, has become standard, presenters should always ask themselves whether they really need to use it. That's because communication can suffer greatly from the simple act of diverting the audience's attention away from the presenter and towards the screen — especially if what's on the screen isn't particularly compelling.

### ***Two rules of thumb for effective use of media technology***

- Use the technology if it will amplify your impact, not diminish it.
- Use the technology to highlight meaning.

With these two rules in mind, consider a presenter who has a lot of details to communicate, and who has listed them as bullet points on multiple slides.

1. Does this amplify the impact? No, it diminishes it. Even the least dynamic human speaker is probably more interesting than a list of bullet points on a screen.
2. Does this highlight meaning? No. Only specialists need all the details. If you're presenting to non-specialists, or to people with limited time to devote to the topic, you have a responsibility to direct them to what the information means.

### ***Guidelines for Effective Presentations***

All staff who give presentations as part of their work, especially those who present to the City Council or other governing bodies, should receive training in effective presentation design and delivery (see **RECOMMENDATION: Presentation Training**.)

1. Consider not using presentation software.
2. If you do use software, use it as an enhancement of your personal delivery of the message, not as a substitute. For example, you might choose to have very few slides in your presentation, and use it only when you want to show a useful chart, graph, illustration, photo or video.
3. Try to find one simple, significant focus idea that organizes everything else you say. For example, not "Department Progress Report" but "How Innovation Saved Water and Money."
4. Use as few words per slide as possible — one or two big, meaningful words are often all you need. Try to avoid using any bulleted lists. Use images in place of words whenever practical.
5. Don't use slides as cue cards. If you do, it will mean that both you and your audience are looking at a boring screen instead of at each other. If you need to refer to written notes, either put them in the software's presenter's notes window (and set up your displays so that only you can see the notes), or print the notes on paper.

6. Don't use visual design elements that don't have meaning. Most stock slide backgrounds are just distracting (there's seldom reason for a background to try to get the audience's attention — you want them focused on the foreground). So too are most uses of the transitions and animations found in presentation software. Cross-fades, spins and fly-ins seldom amplify meaning — and won't make up for uninteresting content. Many of the best presentations are also the simplest.
7. Have one or more well-designed templates ready, so that people who haven't been trained in design can more easily and quickly produce an attractive and effective presentation.

## Document Management

Any large organization generates large numbers of documents. Managing them can be either a boost or a drag on productivity.

One need only consider the difference in cost of an employee who is able to find documents quickly vs. one who must search for many minutes, and then multiply that by hundreds of employees over the course of a year.

It's important to our productivity for all staff to have access to, and know how to use, efficient document management systems.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Document Management Trainings**

The IT Department, with any needed assistance from our communications consultants, should conduct periodic trainings to ensure that staff members understand how to make effective use of Office 365 cloud storage and other document management tools.

# External Communication

## Communicating with the Public We Serve

*I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. — Maya Angelou*

Whenever we talk to a member of the public, we have the opportunity to put our values into practice — and to build levels of trust and satisfaction in the people for whom we work.

We can do that by following these guidelines:

1. **Responsiveness.** Anyone who contacts the City should get a prompt, helpful response — whether or not they've reached the right person. Each City employee should be equipped either to offer assistance or to make a direct referral to someone who can. Note that the public now expects responsiveness on social media as well as through more traditional channels, such as phone, email or office visits.
2. **Accessibility.** It should be easy to reach us by phone, email, in person, or other means. We need to be able to serve people of differing languages, cultures and abilities. Forms and processes should be easy to understand. The environment should welcome all visitors, both through physical features and through the behavior of staff.
3. **Empathy and respect.** Everyone we deal with deserves to be treated with empathy and respect. That's true even if they're being difficult — people under stress sometimes behave poorly. Rather than reacting to the behavior, we should try to find out what the underlying problem is, and let them see that we want to help.
4. **Openness.** The public owns all the information we produce, and has a right to see almost all of it, with exceptions for some privacy, legal or investigatory concerns.

Here are some indications of how important it is for us to get this right, from experts in customer service:

*Consumers will tell others about their customer service experiences, both good and bad, with the bad news reaching more ears. Americans say they tell an average of nine people about good experiences, and nearly twice as many (16 people) about poor ones — making every individual service interaction important for businesses.*

*Customers who have a fantastic service experience say friendly representatives (65%) who are ultimately able to solve their concerns (66%) are most influential.*

*“Good Service Is Good Business”, American Express<sup>6</sup>*

*A typical business hears from only about four percent of its dissatisfied customers.*

*Seven out of 10 complaining customers will do business with you again if you resolve the complaint in their favor.*

*If you resolve a complaint on the spot 95% will return and do business with you again.*

*“Understanding Customers”, Ruby Newell-Legner<sup>7</sup>*

## Customer Service Processes

In everything we do, our values are, or should be, embodied in our processes. This is particularly important when we are serving the public. Wherever possible, we should seek to design or improve service processes from the point of view of the customer. We should ask ourselves the customer’s experience will be an expression of our values.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Adopt or Improve Ticketing and Task Management Systems**

Wherever members of the public make requests of us, we should have a system for making sure that each request is recorded, assigned, and tracked to a satisfactory response. Attempting to do this though non-purpose-built systems (for example by using email, voice messages or notepads) is unlikely to work well, especially when the volume of the requests is high, or the time to resolution may be long.

Instead, a software-based ticketing and task management system should be employed, and staff should be trained in its use.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://about.americanexpress.com/news/pr/2011/csbar.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.rubyspeaks.com/csdvdhandouts/LeadersGuide-SecretsToKeepingOurCustomersHappy.pdf>

## Our Websites

The City has websites for:

1. The City: <http://www.ci.salinas.ca.us> (probably to be updated in 2016 to <http://cityofsalinas.org>, with the launch of the new City website)
2. The Public Library: <http://www.salinaspubliclibrary.org>
3. The Police Department: <http://www.salinaspd.com>
4. Our Economic Development program: <http://businessinsalinas.com>
5. The Public Works Department's Environmental Resource Programs: <http://www.environmentsalinas.com>

For many if not most people, an organization's website has become the default source for finding information and for conducting many transactions. This is certainly true for the City of Salinas.

So it's important that each department ensures that website information, news, event listings and contact details are always up to date, and available in English and Spanish as required.

Not only is this an expected part of good customer service, it sends a meta-message that we are well-organized, active and attentive to the public we serve (and out-of-date web content sends the opposite meta-message).

We can also take advantage of the web as a potentially more convenient and efficient platform for transactions that traditionally took place in person, by mail or by phone. The new City website, expected in 2016, will include more support for such transactions.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Designate and Train Web Contributors**

The new City website, expected in the first half of 2016, will be designed to make content updates easy for non-technical users. Each department and/or division should designate at least one person who is responsible for updating its web content, and that person should attend training in the basic skills needed.

**RECOMMENDATION: Make More Use of Online Tools**

The City currently has, or soon will have, systems that support online transactions and other activities, including:

- ° New World in the Finance Department
- ° Open Counter for new business formation
- ° TrackIt in the Community Development Department
- ° The GIS system in the Public Works Department
- ° Koha Library in the Library Department
- ° LicensePet and PetHarbor in the Animal Services Division
- ° Beehive.

The IT Department, with any needed assistance from our communications consultants, can survey the existing tools and look for opportunities to unify or synchronize their use, to ensure that we are gaining all the value we can from them, while avoiding duplication or other inefficiencies.

At the same time existing workflows can be reviewed to find opportunities to use technology to improve them. For example, some forms are still filled out on paper, when they might be entered directly into an online system via a mobile device or computer.

**Email Newsletters**

The City uses email newsletters, also known as e-news or e-blasts, to reach members of the public, along with journalists and communication partners such as community organizations.

Any email to a large list of contacts should be sent using our web-based email list management software, Constant Contact. There are several reasons for this:

- The software supports the easy creation of attractively designed emails.
- The software makes it easier to maintain up-to-date contact lists, which can be segmented by recipients' interests, location or other factors.

- The delivery rate is better, as the software is recognized by email systems as a legitimate sender of mass emails (any email that's sent to many addresses at once risks being flagged as spam).
- We can track and analyze the performance of each email.
- Recipients are able to manage their subscriptions easily, and we are prevented from accidentally sending messages to people who have unsubscribed.

### ***Good E-News Practices***

- To ensure attractive, readable and consistent design, use one of our pre-designed templates, choosing the one appropriate for your message.
- Keep text brief, and use images as much as possible. It's often a good idea to include a short summary of a story in an email, and link to the full story on our website (this will be easier to do when our new website is online).
- Check that images you use are not too big for sending by email. Large files take longer to download, and very large files may cause an email to be rejected by the recipient's mail server. A rough guideline is that images in an email should be in the range of 5 to 50 KiloBytes each. By comparison, a photo taken straight from a phone or camera may be several MegaBytes, i.e. hundreds or thousands of times larger. Image files can be resized for email (and the web and social media) using widely available, often free, software.
- Double-check the accuracy and appearance of your email before sending, including by sending yourself one or more test messages. It's very easy to overlook typos or other errors in an email, and often you won't notice them until you carefully read through a test message.
- Select the appropriate list of recipients for your message. Over time, we create and refine lists that are segmented by interests, location and other factors, so that we can do our best to send people messages they will find relevant.
- In your other communications and activities, invite people to sign up for our e-news, so that we can expand the reach and inclusiveness of our civic engagement.
- Respect people's subscription choices, in particular when they choose to unsubscribe (our email list management software helps us with this). Annoying people with unwanted email is counter-productive both for them and for us.



- Protect our subscriber's privacy by not sharing the email list with others. A legitimate email list is "opt-in", meaning that people have given their consent to be on it.

## **Postal / Direct Mail**

Many of the messages that formerly would have been sent by postal mail are now sent by email. But there are times when postal mail, also known as direct mail, is still a better choice. For example, if we need to reach everyone in a particular neighborhood, we won't have email addresses for all of them, but we will have postal addresses.

## **Surveys**

As part of our goal of building civic engagement, we should frequently ask people what they think. Sometimes it's worth doing that through surveys.

These can range from the casual to the scientific:

- A survey card displayed at a reception desk, distributed at meetings or sent by mail.
- A brief survey form on the website, featuring only a few questions, or even just one.
- An emailed survey (Constant Contact supports the creation of email surveys).
- A formal, scientifically designed survey, prepared and managed by professionals.

Surveys can be especially valuable when you want to measure results. Conduct an initial survey to establish a baseline, and then, after some action has been taken, conduct a follow-up survey to measure changes in the response.

## **Public Meetings**

Public meetings are fundamental to democracy, allowing citizens to observe and interact with their government at work. They're so important that they're managed by skilled staff, led by the City Clerk and the City Attorney, and are regulated by legislation — most importantly, by the Brown Act, California's open meetings law.

The Brown Act is designed to ensure that the public's business is done in public. Among other things, it requires that the public must be given advance notice, with an agenda, of any meeting of elected officials. Those officials must avoid discussing public business outside of a properly noticed meeting.

Public meetings should be coordinated at least with the City Clerk's office, and with the City Attorney's office if any legal questions are likely to come up (such as a potential Brown Act issue).

The City Clerk's office is in charge of major meetings, such as those held by the City Council and City commissions.

Here are guidelines for conducting other meetings, such as town halls:

- If elected officials will attend, check that they will not constitute a quorum and/or that they will not conduct public business, which should be reserved for a noticed and agenda meeting.
- If the meeting might be newsworthy, notify local media well in advance (at least 24 hours if at all possible).
- Choose a time and location that will be convenient for as many of your invitees as possible.
- Be sure that the space is adequate and safe for the anticipated attendance, with adequate parking, and that it's accessible for the handicapped.
- Arrange for simultaneous Spanish-language and American Sign Language interpretation.
- Consider arranging for food and beverages.
- Consider arranging for child care.
- Try to photograph and/or video the meeting, so we will be able to amplify its impact via social media, email and the web. Consider live streaming it, via Periscope (which is free) or another video streaming service.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Trainings in Meeting Design and Facilitation**

Not everyone knows how to create and run a good public meeting, and the consequences of a poor one can be significant. It is recommended that training be required for all who will need it.

## **Online Town Halls**

Occasionally we may conduct online town halls, using web software. For example, we did this with 2014's "Salinas Budget Challenge", which invited locals to weigh in on priorities for the upcoming City budget.

An online town hall lacks the immediacy and richness of an in-person gathering, but it has other advantages, such as allowing for asynchronous discussion over a longer period of time, more capacity for recording and measuring public opinion, and accessibility for people who may find it difficult to get to a live meeting.

## **Media Relations**

### **Overview**

As described in *The Importance of Effective Communication*, the media are our most effective means of communicating with large numbers of people — in other words, of fulfilling our mission.

The media are also fundamental to the functioning of a healthy democracy — this is why they are sometimes called "the fourth estate" (in the U.S., the other three are the Executive, the Congress and the Judiciary). Thomas Jefferson thought that the free flow of information was so important that he once said, "If I had to choose between government without newspapers, and newspapers without government, I wouldn't hesitate to choose the latter."

Still, it's common to be unhappy with the news we see. Common complaints are that it's inaccurate, sensationalized, or trivial.

But while such complaints are often justified, most journalists are doing the best they can within an imperfect system — just like most other people, including City employees. Working under intense pressure to produce, journalists must attract readers, viewers or web clicks — while knowing that although many of us claim to want serious, objective news, what draws the highest ratings is very different.

We as consumers of news share responsibility for its flaws.

And because the media are so important to our mission of serving the public, it's our responsibility to work with journalists as effectively as we can.

That comes down to *succeeding by helping journalists succeed*. **Our goal should be make it as easy as possible for reporters to deliver interesting, accurate, useful stories.**

## Public Information Officer

It's common for a city the size of Salinas, especially one with the volume and significance of news coverage Salinas generates, to have a staff Public Information Officer, and quite possibly, another one for the Police Department. But currently, because of budget constraints, neither the City nor the PD has a full-time PIO. Instead, our communications consultant, Boots Road Group, provides an on-call Acting PIO, who helps City staff and journalists with media matters, and handles larger stories personally.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Public Information Officer(s)**

Given the following factors, we recommend that the City hire a full-time, staff PIO whenever budget priorities allow. Ideally, a second PIO would be hired for the Police Department. The recommendation to hire at least one PIO is based on:

- ° The daily need to communicate with the media and other external audiences on a wide range of important stories.
- ° A similar need to manage or assist with internal communications.
- ° The value to the public of having a steady flow of accurate information about what their City government is doing.
- ° The value of relieving other staff of the added burden of media relations duties.
- ° The workload involved in not only responding to emergent needs, but in planning and being proactive for effective and strategically aligned communications.

The staff PIO should have deep understanding of journalism and other forms of communications, including public relations, marketing and social media. He or she should be fluently bilingual and culturally competent in English and Spanish. A police PIO would benefit from experience as a sworn police officer.

**RECOMMENDATION: Quick, Low-Overhead Media Updates for Breaking News**

Given the City's lack of a full-time PIO, reporters sometimes need to wait for basic details about breaking news. This is a frequent issue with crime coverage: police officers are busy attending to their first priority — dealing with the crime itself — and, with no PIO on duty to help out, may need to defer taking reporters' phone calls and/or writing a press release.

There may be a partial measure that will help: a quick voice memo distribution system.

When a newsworthy incident happens, the person in charge of the response uses a smart phone app to record a quick voice memo, containing the basic details of the incident plus word on who will be available to share more information, when and where.

The voice memo is saved to a members-only cloud folder, using a tool such as Dropbox or Box.

That sends an email notification to the reporters who have been invited to share the folder, so they can retrieve the voice memo.

**Translation and Interpretation**

Currently the City provides Spanish translation and interpretation for some of its communications. For example, many City email newsletters are translated, many public meetings feature simultaneous interpretation, and when possible, interviews with Spanish-language media are conducted in Spanish.

Given the high percentage of Spanish speakers in Salinas, though, there is room for more, as resources permit.

**RECOMMENDATION: Augment In-House Translation with Contract Services**

While the City's simultaneous interpretation services usually are provided by contracted professionals, document translation is usually handled by bilingual staff members, subject to their availability. If feasible, it is recommended that one or more contract translators be retained in order to increase the amount of City information that can be provided in Spanish. Examples include:

- ° Press releases to Spanish-language media, who currently must devote resources to translating English releases they receive.
- ° More e-newsletters.
- ° More website content.
- ° Social media posts and replies.

## Media Relations

### Responding to Media Inquiries

#### *Overview*

When someone asks you a question you probably just go ahead and answer it — that’s what happens in a normal conversation. But talking with the media is not a normal conversation: what you say may end up being heard — or misheard — by thousands or even millions of people.

This doesn’t mean that it’s a good idea to be less than responsive or truthful with reporters. But it does mean that you should present your message in a way that is likely to be received as you intended. Here are some guidelines to help make sure that happens, covering four aspects: Preparation, Initial Contact, forming your Message and the Interview.

#### *Preparation*

- **Make a good story by starting with a good truth.** The popular image of media relations is of “spin doctors.” Spin doctors do of course exist, but who wants to be one? Telling the truth not only feels better, it works better — as the saying goes, you don't have to remember what you said to whom. The first principle of successful communications is to make sure you’re working for an organization that is genuinely committed to doing the right thing — and to owning up when it gets things wrong.
- **Build a culture of message discipline.** That’s a culture in which people know the importance of communicating accurately, clearly and effectively on behalf of a democratic body, and believe in following the procedures that make that possible. It’s not a culture in which individuals decide for themselves what to say and when to say it. Sometimes, a whistle-blower legitimately may feel obliged to leak information, because something nefarious is going on. But most leaking is self-indulgent, and does nothing to advance the public interest.
- **Identify who is authorized** to speak on the record, about which subjects. Make sure they’re trained to be able to fulfill this role.
- **Make sure that all spokespeople are very well informed.** This is not for the purpose of burying a reporter in detail. It’s to make sure that they can give accurate answers for all the

questions likely to be asked, and that they won't be flustered by discovering gaps in their knowledge mid-interview.

- **Define your core messages** (see below), keep them updated and distribute them to all who need them.
- **Build trust with local journalists.** They'll be more likely to give you the benefit of the doubt if they've gotten to know you as an honest, helpful person. Don't indulge any urge to fight with, cut off, or "pay back" a journalist. It's probably not really justified, and it's almost never helpful. As the old (pre-digital) saying goes, "Never pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel."

### *Initial Contact*

There are a few basics to take care of when a reporter calls or emails:

1. **Be friendly**, with an attitude of seeking to help the reporter — while bearing in mind that it's not the reporter's job to help you. Their job is to get news, whether it helps you or not.
2. **Take notes.** It's easy to forget important details. You'll probably need them to brief colleagues and/or prepare for an interview.
3. **Get the reporter's name and media outlet.** If you don't know the reporter and/or the outlet, you might want to take time to confirm they are who they say they are. People have been known to impersonate reporters.
4. **Ask for a description of the story** the reporter is working on — not just the subject, but the context of that subject. It's not enough to know that the story is about "the new budget" if it's actually about "critics disagree with the new budget's priorities."
5. **Ask whom else they've spoken with or are planning to speak with.** Try to get a sense of what other sources are saying, so you'll know if you need to correct or respond to anything.

Now, before answering the first question:

6. **Ask yourself if you need to say anything at all.** For example, suppose a spokesperson for your organization has given a statement that says everything there is to say. If a reporter asks you to comment on that statement, what are you going to add? If it isn't useful or relevant, you risk muddying the message.
7. **Ask yourself if you're the right person to comment.** It may be that you should refer the reporter to someone else who is better equipped to talk about this subject. If so, get in touch with that person and brief them on what you know about the reporter's inquiry.



8. **Ask yourself if you're well-prepared to comment.** You may need time to catch up with the story, to collect your thoughts, and/or consult with your colleagues. You can almost always make arrangements to get back to the reporter soon, once you're ready.

### ***Your message***

In any media story, you can only count on getting one main point across. You should do your best to make sure it's the one you *want* to get across. Here's how:

**1. Understand your audience.** Think about what they most need to know, so you'll be sure to include it in your message. For example, if there's a public safety threat, such as an earthquake or a fire, people will want to know exactly what the threat is, what's being done about it, and what they should do to protect themselves.

Also, think about how their culture, education level and other factors might affect how the audience will hear what you have to say, and use that to guide how you speak.

**2. Define one simple, emotional message.** The most emotionally compelling thing anyone says or does will probably dominate the story. Emotion is what people are most interested in, so the media are under great financial pressure to provide it.

This doesn't mean that your message has to include sex or violence. And it doesn't mean that if someone is making an emotional attack on you, you should respond in kind — in a case like that, it's often best to deflate the negative emotion by remaining calm. But it does mean that you should find a way of making your point that involves:

- a. Real people
- b. Physical objects
- c. Actions.

This is because people experience their emotions through their senses, not their intellects. So you need to talk in terms of things they can see, hear, touch, smell — and care about. They don't care about abstractions, complexity, jargon, and impersonal "officialese." Compare the following two ways of making the same point:

*The housing assistance program has seen a 10% increase in successful outcomes.*

*Vs.*

*50 more families will sleep in their own beds tonight.*

Which one is likely to be quoted?

**3. Define just a few supporting points.** The goal is to make everything you say either a statement of the core message or of some aspect of it. That way, no matter how your comments get edited, some version of your core message will end up in the story. For example, if you decided that your core message was “50 more families will sleep in their own beds tonight,” you might use “That’s a 10% increase in successful outcomes” as a supporting point.

Other supporting points might be “This progress is partly due to streamlining the application process” and “We are also seeing the benefits of community based organizations working together.”

It can help to organize your thinking by making a message box (see Simplicity: Helping People Understand and Remember). Write your core message in the middle and fill in your supporting points around it.

**4. Plan to stick to your core message and supporting points.** For many of us, the temptation to say “and another thing...” can be nearly irresistible. If the interviewer seems attentive, you may feel like this is your big chance to say everything people need to know. If the interviewer falls silent (sometimes deliberately), you may instinctively fill up the space. If the interviewer challenges you, you may start throwing in extra information as justification or self-defense.

## ***The Interview***

There is no formulaic way to handle every possible interview. But these techniques will help you handle many common challenges:

**1. Slow down and relax.** Interviews usually involve stress, even for people who have done a lot of them. Under stress, many of us tend to talk faster and think less. Learn to recognize your own stress signs and use them as cues to pause, breathe and relax each tense part of your body — un-hunch your shoulders, un-clench your fists, etc. Try having practice conversations at a measured, thoughtful pace, allowing silences while you think, and checking your body language. Among the benefits:

- a. By saying less you reduce the odds of saying something you’ll regret.
- b. By taking time to think, you’re more likely to say something useful and quotable.
- c. People who appear calm and unhurried are easier to trust and relate to.

**2. Check the visuals,** if photography or video will be involved. Dress appropriately for the message — and note that what's appropriate might very well change from one situation to another. Check that everything is in place — a stray collar or piece of hair can steal all the attention from your message. Avoid wearing sunglasses (they tend to alienate people), and avoid having the sun or bright lights in your eyes, which will make you squint. Check the setting — think about the picture that you're going to be part of, and what meaning that picture will communicate.

**3. Sincerely acknowledge the emotions of others.** Sometimes the reason you're doing an interview is that people are feeling intense emotions about something. In that case, it's often important to begin by showing that you understand their feelings — even if you disagree with their opinions.

For example, suppose a lot of people are angry about a new City project, and it's one that you're convinced will actually make their lives better. Don't begin by explaining why you think these people are wrong, or shouldn't be concerned. Instead, start by saying — sincerely — something like, "I understand that some people are upset about and this, and I can see why they're upset." Then, in the context of addressing their legitimate concerns, explain how the project will work.

**4. Highlight your main point.** In normal conversation, people tend to wander around the subject, groping towards what they want to say. But for an interview, you should be prepared enough to know what you want to say. The first part of your response to a question sets the frame for everything that follows. If you can briefly and clearly state your point, it will make it much less likely that the interviewer will miss it. If your answer needs to stretch across several sentences, try to end with a restatement of your point.

Suppose a reporter asks, "What do you think is the best way to reduce crime?" Compare these two ways of beginning a response:

*Well, you know, it can be hard to say, and there are a lot of different hypotheses. Some people think crime is caused by poverty, some talk about drugs, society, the family... Some say you just need to have a lot more police. But we think you have to do more than one thing. It's important to try to prevent crime in the first place...*

Vs.

*We believe there are four key things we must pay attention to: prevention, intervention, enforcement and re-entry — we call this our PIER strategy. Here's what that means...*

No matter how well prepared you are, though, you'll probably give less than perfectly formed answers now and then. If you catch yourself rambling, it's fine to say something like, "But here's the main point" or "This is what people need to know."

**5. Stop talking.** Once you've said what you have to say, stop talking. Practice not filling silences — if you're done, you're done, and you can just wait for the next question.

**6. When necessary, know how to decline to answer.** Occasionally, you may need to politely reject the question outright, for example if it's irrelevant, inflammatory or based on inadequate information:

*Q. What would you do if... ?*

*A. I'm sorry, I'd just be speculating, and I don't think that would be useful.*

*Or:*

*Q. Joe Smith has said some pretty rough stuff about you, how do you respond?*

*A. I'd be happy to talk about issues, but I don't think a personal back-and-forth helps anyone much. What I think matters to most people is...*

If you do need to decline to answer, avoid using the phrase "No comment." It sounds too much like you're hiding something. Instead, you can say something that feels more polite and forthcoming, like "I'm not the expert on that, but I can put you in touch with someone who is", or "I want to talk about that and will as soon as I can, but until the case is resolved we have to follow the rules of confidentiality."

**7. It's all right to say you don't know.** Although it's important to be well prepared, you can't be ready for every possible question. If you don't know the answer, it's better to say so than to try to fake it. You can say something like "I'm not up to date on that, but I can look into it and get back to you."

**8. If the news is bad, acknowledge it.** People who have been through media training often come across as insincere, because they ignore, deny or spin everything that strikes them as negative.

But some things just *are* negative. In those cases where your organization really has made a mistake or done something wrong, it's better to do this:

- a. Face it quickly and fully.

- b. Acknowledge people's feelings about it — don't tell them they shouldn't be upset, or should just "move on."
- c. Apologize sincerely.
- d. Say what you're doing to make things better.

## How to Write a Press Release

Journalists spend a long time mastering news writing, but the basics can be learned by anyone who writes reasonably well.

### ***A) Cover Who, What, When, Where, Why and How.***

In a story about an emergency preparedness meeting, that might include:

- a. Who is invited, who is teaching, and who is organizing.
- b. What is being offered, and what exactly will happen at the meetings.
- c. When the meetings will happen.
- d. Where the meetings will happen.
- e. Why the meetings are happening, and why they are important.
- f. How the meetings will happen (will they feature a presentation, discussion, video, Spanish interpretation, food, etc.), how do people register to attend, and how much if anything do they cost.

### ***B) Make sure your facts are 100 percent accurate, and cite your sources.***

People need to be able to trust our information, both to avoid inconvenience (say, through getting a time or location wrong) and to maintain a good relationship with their city government. Reporters in particular are very sensitive to accuracy, down to the smallest details. We need to be confident that a newspaper could print our press release as is, with no risk of having to issue a correction later.

Whenever asserting a fact that isn't widely known to be true, cite your source, so readers can judge the assertion's credibility. For example, instead of saying this...

*The Salinas Valley ag industry contributes more than \$8 billion dollars to the local economy.*

...It's better to say this:

*The Salinas Valley ag industry contributes more than \$8 billion to the local economy, according to the latest Monterey County crop report.*

***C) Use the simplest language and the fewest words that still make the point.***

People are busy and in a hurry. They don't want to spend any more time than they have to figuring out what you're trying to say. Instead of saying this...

*It is hoped that the result of the discussions will be an enhanced and widely shared understanding of the main factors driving local economic growth.*

It's better to say this...

*After these discussions, we all should know more about what makes our economy grow.*

***D) Use the Inverted Pyramid format.***

*The following is adapted from the Huffington Post article "How to Write Both Fast and Well, Part 4: Flip Your Pyramid", by Spencer Critchley, and is used by permission<sup>8</sup>:*

The Inverted Pyramid is the most commonly used format for news stories. It's so named because it features the story's most important point -- the base of the pyramid -- first. That's followed by progressively less important points, until we reach the tip of the pyramid at the bottom of the story.

This shape works well for news, for a couple of reasons: readers in a hurry can scan a story and drop it at any point, without missing the most important material, while editors in a hurry can cut the story almost anywhere and it'll still make sense.

As simple as it is to understand, though, the Inverted Pyramid requires practice to master. That's because you need to get out of your own head, and into your readers' hearts. You must learn to focus on what they care about, not you.

Getting this backwards is such a common mistake that editors have a name for it. It's called "burying the lead" (or "lede", as its sometimes spelled, to avoid confusion with the heavy

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/spencer-critchley/how-to-write-both-fast-we\\_2\\_b\\_8270150.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/spencer-critchley/how-to-write-both-fast-we_2_b_8270150.html)

metal). The lead is what comes first, and in an Inverted Pyramid story, what comes first should be what readers care about most. It will usually be based on your angle (which we've discussed previously).

Here's an example of burying the lead:

*The City of Anyville will host a town hall meeting at the Anyville Community Center on Friday, Nov. 12 from 7 to 8:30 p.m.*

*The topic of the meeting will be the planned construction of a new stadium on the east side.*

*The facility will be the new home of the Anyville Hornets, as well as a venue for a variety of other sports and entertainment events. Its construction is expected to cost the City many millions of dollars in tax breaks, infrastructure spending and ongoing services. Supporters say it will significantly boost the downtown economy and generate thousands of new jobs.*

The above is typical of much of the writing we all run across (and maybe produce ourselves): correct, but dull.

That's because the lead is buried. Readers don't care who's organizing the meeting, as important as that may seem to the organizers. Nor do they care where or when the meeting is happening, before they have any interest in going.

What readers care about is buried in the third paragraph: the costs and benefits of the new stadium. That's because those stand to make readers' lives either worse or better. Readers also probably care about whether the meeting itself will be interesting or entertaining.

So here's how a news editor might dig up the lead and rewrite the opening paragraph:

*It will cost taxpayers uncounted millions -- but it might create your next job. That's the potential of the planned Anyville Hornets stadium, and it'll be the topic of hot debate at an upcoming town hall meeting.*

That's a pretty big difference -- the difference between boring and not. And all we had to do was get the pyramid pointing the right way: upside down.

## Press Release Template

Below is a template showing the standard features of a press release. The template we actually use is stored within the City's email list management software.

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media Contact:

Firstname Lastname

yourname@ci.salinas.ca.us

(831) 555-1212

## Headline

*CITY, STATE, DATE* — Find the one big thing people will want to know (this may be different from what *you* think is most important) and base everything on that. Start with a strong **lead** (sometimes spelled “lede”).

You will probably write your press release in “inverted pyramid” style. That means the most important information comes first, followed by progressively less important information.

Make sure you include **Who, What, When, Where, Why** and, if relevant, **How**. These are the minimum elements of a complete news story.

Use short paragraphs.

“It’s common, but not required, to include one or more **quotes** from key people in the story,” said Mayor Joe Gunter. “If you write a quote for someone else, make sure you get it approved.”

Wrap it up: last details, next steps if any, other contacts, anything still needed.

# # #

[3 #'s are traditionally used to indicate the end.]



## When and How to Hold a Press Conference

### Overview

A press conference may look fairly straightforward: you have something to say, so you invite the media to come hear you say it. But there are all kinds of ways a press conference can go wrong, or right, depending on how well you can answer these questions — which also serve as a planning checklist:

- ☐ Why hold a press conference?
- ☐ Whom should you coordinate with?
- ☐ What is the City's message?
- ☐ What is your message?
- ☐ Who will speak?
- ☐ How will speakers be prepared?
- ☐ What is the setting?
- ☐ What equipment is needed?
- ☐ What is the timing?
- ☐ How will you contact the media, and when?
- ☐ What support will you offer the media?
- ☐ What should you do after the press conference?

### Why hold a press conference?

More than ever, it's important to hold a press conference only when it's really justified. Media outlets have far fewer reporters available than they used to, so they will only send a reporter to a press conference if they're confident the time will be well spent.

Hold a press conference when:

1. Our news is important to a large number of people.
2. We want to save time by getting the word out to all the media at once.
3. We will benefit from the visual impact of staging the event.

### ***Whom should you coordinate with?***

Before scheduling a press conference, make sure you've checked with the people internally who need to know about it, and sought the advice and information they may be able to offer. This will avoid conflicting messages, catching colleagues unprepared, and the potential for confusion or even damage that might result.

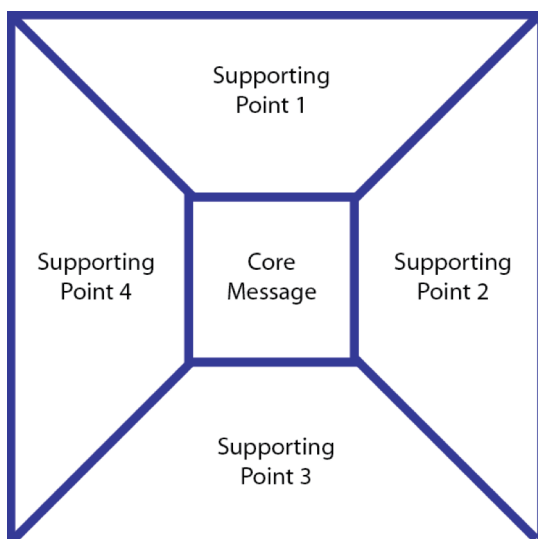
At the City of Salinas, at least the following people need to be coordinated with well in advance of a press conference:

- The Mayor and City Council
- The City Manager
- The City Attorney
- The Acting Public Information Officer
- The director of any department that will be mentioned at the press conference.

### ***What is the City's message?***

The City may already have a position on your topic, possibly including talking points. It's important to check in advance, in order to avoid the risk of creating confusion with conflicting messages.

### ***What is your message?***



In any interaction with the media, you will only be able to get one main point across. Whatever the reporter (or editor) thinks is the main point is going to be the headline of the story, and anything else will amount to details that support the headline.

That's why it's important to know what your one key message is, and make sure that it's central to everything you say. Any other points you make should support the key message. You can think of it in terms of a *message box*.

*Message box*

If you don't focus your press conference with one key message, you will surrender control of the story to the reporter. He or she will decide what your main point is, and it may be something you think is irrelevant, or even wrong.

*NOTE: The most emotional thing that anyone says or does in front of a reporter is almost certainly going to end up driving the story.*

Before you call the press conference, make sure you have defined your key message in terms that are:

- **Simple:** so that someone with an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education or less can understand
- **Relevant:** so that your intended audience has a reason to care — ask yourself, “What’s in it for them?”
- **Emotionally engaging:** without hyping, look for the emotional content that will give your message impact, such as a story, an event or a visually striking setting. For example, instead of simply announcing the opening of a park, you might announce that the children of the neighborhood will take part in a 3-legged race to break through a ceremonial ribbon.

Above all, **double-check your information.** Journalists must be able to trust that what you say is both honest and technically correct.

### ***Who will speak?***

A press conference should not be seen as a chance for everyone who’s interested to take turns saying whatever is on their minds. That can rapidly lead to loss of control of the message.

Instead, choose one speaker, or a small number of them, according to who is best equipped to present this particular message effectively.

If there are multiple speakers, appoint someone to manage the flow of events, and brief each speaker ahead of time on how it will go.

### ***How will speakers be prepared?***

Speakers should be briefed on the key message and supporting points for the press conference — i.e. the talking points.

If necessary, prepared remarks can be written, and should be reviewed in advance. In some cases these remarks can be sent the media beforehand, in order to give them a head start writing their stories. The text might be marked “embargoed” until the time of the press conference, meaning it should not be published or broadcast before then.

Bear in mind though, that there is a risk that the embargo may be broken, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Speakers should also be prepared for likely questions. Often they are supplied with a list of those questions, with model answers.

Ideally, speakers will have had media training, so that they know how to present the message effectively, handle questions and deal with the unexpected.

### ***What is the setting?***

Not all press conferences are best held behind a podium at City Hall. If possible, choose a setting that visually reinforces the message. TV is the highest-impact form of media, and most of the impact of a TV story is visual.

Think about who and what will be in the background of any video or photographs of the event. In some cases, you may want to invite people to attend in order to be part of the scene (see the example of the children at the park opening under What is your message?).

Avoid locations where the lighting is bad, or where there is a lot of noise. For example:

- If you’re back-lit, you’ll appear as a shadow against a bright background.
- If bright sunlight is shining in your eyes, you’ll squint. (Wearing sunglasses is usually not a good alternative.)
- If cars and trucks are driving by, airplanes flying overhead, or machinery operating, you’ll be hard to hear.

### ***What equipment is needed?***

Make sure you have planned for lighting, sound, a podium or table if needed, and any props.

- **Lights:** Available room light or exterior light (have a backup plan for rain) often works fine, but check that it will be adequate — including for speakers, who may need to read from notes.

- **Sound:** In most cases a high quality PA system is a good idea, to make sure that voices will be heard clearly, and that they will dominate any background noise.
- **Props:** These can help to tell the story visually. At a minimum, it's a good idea to have a sign or crest on a podium, and/or a backdrop that will reinforce the message. That way, even if people are watching TV with the sound turned down, they will get the key message.

### ***What is the timing?***

Schedule the press conference at a time that will make it easy for the media to cover it:

- Check to make sure you're not competing with another major event.
- Make sure reporters will have had time to get their daily assignments in the morning, and will not be close to deadlines. Late morning is often a good time.
- Avoid Friday afternoons, weekends or holidays.

### ***How will you contact the media, and when?***

Media advisories and press releases are usually sent out by the Acting Public Information Officer.

A media advisory advises journalists about an upcoming event, such as a press conference, for planning purposes. A press release is written so that it could be published as a news story.

Make sure to use a media email list that is accurate, up to date, and targeted to the right people — a story about business should go to business journalists, but a story about a new park probably shouldn't. In some cases, a personal call or email to a key journalist may be in order.

Give enough notice — at least 24 hours and preferably more, unless you're responding to a crisis.

### ***What support will you offer the media?***

One way to think about successful media relations is that the goal is to help journalists succeed at their jobs.

Offer helpful support for journalists, which might include:

- Advance notice (typically in a media advisory) about logistics such as parking, building access, security measures, etc.
- A designated media liaison person onsite
- Copies of a press release and/or prepared remarks, plus related collateral, such as brochures or flyers
- A designated media area, with space for cameras and equipment
- Easy access to electrical power
- Media parking, conveniently located for loading in and out
- A follow-up email to those who couldn't attend, with relevant documents (such as a press release) and a link to high-resolution photos and/or video.

### ***What should you do after the press conference?***

- As just mentioned, it's often a good idea to send a follow-up email to journalists who were unable to attend, with information and images they could use to run a story.
- Track the coverage that results from the event. In particular, compare the coverage you got to the coverage you hoped for, and learn from the comparison.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Media Skills Trainings**

In the recent past the City has offered media skills training to some of its employees, but not yet to all who deal with journalists. The City should periodically offer such trainings to on-the-record employees as well as to members of the City Council.

## Social Media

### Overview

Next to traditional news media, social media has become one of the most effective ways we have for reaching large numbers of people — and unlike traditional media, social media enable us to engage those people in a conversation, which increases their engagement with the democratic process.

There is also cross-over between news media and social media, as journalists follow our social media accounts to find news ideas, and to share our posts, as we do with theirs.

Some staff are designated, and trained, to speak on behalf of the City. All staff can contribute, by participating in the City's social conversations. And all who use social media can do so effectively by following these guidelines:

- Be useful and interesting
- Be open
- Be personable
- Be responsive
- Be responsible

#### ***1. Be Useful and Interesting***

This is the key to creating effective social media content. As described under The Importance of Effective Communication, good communicators have empathy for the people they're talking to. Don't start with what *you* think they should know; start with what *they* would find useful and interesting.

Wherever possible, use images or video in your social content. They draw much more attention and engagement than does text alone.

#### ***2. Be Open***

In any large organization, there can be a natural desire to control the release of information carefully. There can be good reasons for this, for example when there's a

need to vet accuracy, wait for legal approvals, or synchronize timing with other events. But it can also become a habit that leads to being closed-mouthed when it isn't necessary. That can create a barrier to the openness and civic engagement that the City values.

In social media, people expect you to be open, and that expectation can be a healthy reminder for us as government employees. This doesn't mean that we can speak recklessly, of course, but to the extent that we can do so responsibly, we should share useful, interesting information with the people who, after all, already own it.

### **3. Be Personable**

The tradition in government communications is to adopt an anonymous "official voice." This does not work in social media, where people expect to talk informally with a real human being. An informal, personable tone usually works better.

### **4. Be Responsive**

A central value of social media is that it's a *conversation*. While it's important for us to post our own content frequently, it's at least equally important to respond to content that comes from others, in the form of their posts, comments, shares or likes. By conversing with people this way, we will build the size and quality of the City's social network, meaning that we will be able to reach —and engage with — more of the people we serve.

Responsiveness includes accepting and responding to criticisms or complaints. Our practice is to allow and respond to all comments except those that are clearly abusive. The value of this, in terms of trust- and relationship-building, outweighs the impact of a negative comment. Often, unhappy people will feel much better just because we care enough to respond — even in (hopefully rare) cases where we can't help them with their problem. As social media expert Jay Baer says, you should "hug your haters"<sup>9</sup>:

*You shouldn't wait for your less-than-satisfied customers to come to you.  
Complaints indicate pain points that your business needs to address. The sooner*

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.inc.com/jay-baer/how-to-hug-your-haters-3-ways-to-use-complaints-to-strengthen-your-business.html>



*you can uncover them, the faster you'll be able to patch up those parts of your business.*

## **5. Be Responsible**

Notwithstanding the preceding, it remains true that people representing a government entity have special constraints on what they can say and how. As a general rule of thumb, anyone speaking for the City should always be guided by what would best serve the City's mission, and avoid saying anything that might cause offense, misunderstanding, alarm or disorder. More details can be found in our Social Media Legal Policy.

### **RECOMMENDATION: Social Media Trainings**

In the recent past the City has offered social media training to some employees. Such trainings should be offered periodically to employees who will be active in social media on behalf of the City, as well as to those who are interested in helping the City share its messages through their own social networks.

## **Social Media Legal Policy**

The following is excerpted from the City Employees Policy prepared by the City Attorney.

### **SECTION FIVE: SOCIAL MEDIA**

The purpose of this section is to establish guidelines for the use of social media as a means of conveying information about the City, upcoming events and activities of interest, as well as other relevant and pertinent news to its residents. The City has an interest and expectation in deciding what is communicated on behalf of the City through the use of social media. This section may also provide guidelines as to the City's use of social media in the pre-hiring and disciplinary process.

For purposes of this policy, the term "social media" is understood to include content created by individuals, organizations and/or entities using accessible, expandable, and upgradable publishing technologies through and on the Internet. Examples include, but are not limited to, Facebook, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Instagram. For

purposes of this policy, “comments” include information, articles, pictures, videos, or any form of communicative content posted on social media sites.

## **A. CITY-SPONSORED SOCIAL MEDIA SITES**

### **A. 1. General Policy**

The establishment and use of any social media site for the City or any City Department is subject to the approval of the City Manager or his/her designee. Use of social media on behalf of the City or a City Department shall be administered only by a Department-designated coordinator who has read and is familiar with the City’s Social Media and Computer Use policy. Every effort shall be made to incorporate training to those designated individuals responsible for City and Department-specific social media pages. The City Manager or his/her designee may in his or her discretion, from time to time, establish, modify, and expand upon guidelines for the use of the social media site. The following guidelines apply to all social media accounts for the City and any City Department:

- The purpose of the account is typically for the dissemination of general information about the City or a specific project, Department, activity, or event.
- The City social media accounts are maintained by the City and are subject to this Computer & Technology Use Policy.
- To the extent possible, each social media account's home site should contain a link back to the City’s official website for forms, documents, online services, and other information necessary to conduct business with or utilize City services. Examples of such sites are [www.facebook.com/CityOfSalinas](http://www.facebook.com/CityOfSalinas) and [twitter.com/CityOfSalinas](http://twitter.com/CityOfSalinas).
- The Department-designated coordinators should monitor content to the sites to ensure adherence to both the Social Media Policy and the interest and goals of the City.

Despite City presence on social media, the City’s official websites ([www.ci.salinas.ca.us](http://www.ci.salinas.ca.us) and [www.businessinsalinas.com](http://www.businessinsalinas.com)) will remain the City’s primary and predominant Internet presence.

## 2. Non-Public Forum Status

The City social media sites are non-public forums. While the City encourages the public to use the City web and social media sites to access and discuss information and resources, the City expressly reserves the right to impose certain restrictions on the use of its social media, including but not limited to certain City-related topics. Comments on topics or issues not within the jurisdictional purview of the City, or those which the City's moderators deem irrelevant, offensive or abusive, may be removed. The City's social media sites are intended for the exclusive control of the City for the purposes of communication with users. The City social media sites are not nor are they intended to be used to facilitate a general debate or free exchange of ideas. The City reserves the right to restrict or remove any content that is deemed in violation of this Computer & Technology Use Policy or any applicable law.

## 3. Comments

Comments containing any of the following inappropriate forms of communication are not permitted on City social media sites and are subject to removal by the City Manager, his designee, or Department-designated coordinator:

- i. Comments unrelated to the original topic, including unintelligible comments;
- ii. Profane, obscene, or pornographic content/language;
- iii. Content that promotes, fosters or perpetuates harassment or discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, age, religion, gender, national origin, or any other protected classification;
- iv. Defamatory or personal attacks;
- v. Threats of violence to any person or organization;
- vi. Comments in support of, or opposition to, any political campaigns or ballot measures;
- vii. Solicitation of commerce, including but not limited to advertising of any business or product for sale;

- viii. Conduct in violation of any federal, state, or local law, or encouragement of such conduct;
- ix. Information that may compromise the safety and security of the public or public systems; or
- x. Content that violates any intellectual property interest.

The home site of each account should explain that comments are the opinion of the commentator or poster only, and publication of a comment does not imply endorsement of, or agreement by the City, nor do such comments necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the City.

All City social media sites shall adhere to applicable federal, state and local laws, regulations, and policies. All City social media sites are subject to the California Public Records Act. Any content maintained in social media format that is related to City business may be a public record subject to public disclosure, including a list of subscribers, posted communication, and communication submitted for posting. Because of the City's belief in open and transparent meetings and requirements imposed by the Ralph M. Brown Act, council members and members of City boards and commissions should avoid posting comments concerning items within their jurisdictional purview.

City reserves the right to deny access to the City's social media sites to any individual who violates this Social Media policy, at any time and without prior notice.

#### B. Employees' Use of Social Media

Employees representing the City via City social media sites must conduct themselves in accordance with all City policies. Periodic training for designated employees who serve as departmental social media coordinators is encouraged.

### **B. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE PRE-HIRING PROCESS**

Where allowed by state law, the City engages in an examination of a potential employee's background before an offer of conditional employment is extended. Where social media sites are reviewed in order to provide information in regard to the candidate's application, such a review will be conducted unilaterally for all potential candidates. A candidate will not be asked to provide a password or otherwise log in for

the City to obtain access to areas that are not otherwise publically available on the candidate's personal social media page.

### **C.     ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE DISCIPLINARY PROCESS**

Employees utilizing personal social media sites are encouraged to use their best judgment when posting information or opinions that can be viewed by members of the public. Employees may freely comment on issues of public interest but are cautioned that speech which disrupts or impairs the business of the City and is not a matter of public concern may subject the employee to a disciplinary review. In the event that an employee's post on social media violates City personnel rules, the City may impose discipline for such conduct consistent with state and federal law.

Unauthorized on-duty access to personal social media sites (whether using a personal device or City-issued equipment) is not permitted and may subject an employee to disciplinary action.

## Emergency Communications

In the event of a natural disaster or other major emergency, the City will set up an Emergency Command Center. The full emergency response plan is available at:

<https://salinasca.sharepoint.com/sites/emergencyoperations/Shared%20Documents/Emergency%20Operations%20Plan>

A brief summary follows.

- An Emergency Command Center will be established at City Hall or other appropriate location, with adequate phone service, Internet service, desk space and other resources.
- The City Manager will designate an Emergency Command Center manager, to coordinate response across the Fire, Police, Public Works and other City departments, as well as with other jurisdictions.
- The City Manager will designate an emergency Public Information Officer (trained in crisis communication), to be the manager and main point of contact for communicating about the emergency with the media and the public.
- The Emergency Command Center manager and emergency PIO will designate other emergency staff as needed.
- Frequent reports to the media and public will begin as soon as possible with an update on “what we know, what we're doing, what you should do, when we'll know more.” Communication channels will include:
  - Monterey County Office of Emergency Services Network
  - AlertMonterey.org
  - Reverse 911
  - Press conferences and press conference calls
  - Emails to prepared lists of journalists, communications partners (community organizations, etc.) and members of the public.
  - Social media: frequent posts to Facebook, Twitter and, if appropriate, other accounts held by the City and Police departments, and others as appropriate.

- Web: Updates on the front pages of the websites of the City, Police and other departments as appropriate.