



Toolkit for Listening First,

Engaging Better,

and Building Community Trust

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COMMUNICATIONS THAT CONNECT



CELEBRATE. CONNECT. TAKE A LISTEN.

In today's fast-moving world, real connection can feel harder to come by. But in local government, connection is everything. When people feel heard, informed, and respected, trust grows. Conversations get easier. And engagement starts to feel less like a checkbox and more like a community rhythm.

Focus on your 3Ps: People, Personality, and Purpose

Now is the time to create space for real conversations, reflect your community's voice, and build engagement with intention.

Let's get started.





PEOPLE

THE HEART OF COMMUNITY

No one understands your community better than the people who live, work, serve, and show up every day. Whether it's a local business owner, a student, a city employee, a young family new to the city, or a long-time resident, their lived experiences shape how your community initiatives are perceived.

These everyday perspectives are often where the most valuable insights live.

Local Lens Listening

The best insights often come from simple, honest moments. Whether it's a passing comment at the farmers market or a thoughtful story shared over coffee, these conversations reveal how people truly see their community and their city government.

Meaningful engagement doesn't have to mean big meetings or formal surveys. Sometimes, the most trusted feedback comes from low-pressure, high-comfort environments where people feel free to speak their mind.

Check out the next page for a few ideas to get you started! —————>

Park Bench Polling: *Big insight from everyday spaces*

Sometimes, the best feedback comes when people don't feel like they're "on the record." Set up in a park, library entry, or outside city hall with a friendly face and a simple question:

"What's something you wish more people knew about living here?" or

"What is one thing the city does really well?"

Use paper, sticky notes, or even chalk—it's not about polish. It's about presence.

Front Porch Famous: *Meet people where they feel comfortable*

Visit with residents, small business owners, or city employees in their own spaces - a café, front yard, or mechanic's shop. Ask:

"Why did you choose to live in/start a business here?" or

"What do you tell people about our city?"

You'll gain not just stories, but trust. **Bonus:** These stories make for great quotes or feature profiles, so ask to grab a photo, too.

On the Mic: *Capture voices in the wild*

At a city event? At the market? In the hallway after a public meeting? Ask one or two quick, informal questions and capture voice memos (with permission):

"What's something only locals understand?" or

"What makes this place feel like home to you?"

Use highlights into reels, quote graphics, or social posts to let real voices lead the message.

Conversation Circles: *Turn focus groups into real talk*

While there is definitely merit to traditional focus group exercises (see *Community Heart template*), there is nothing like a campfire story or coffee chat to bring out deeper level conversation. Great focus groups feel like conversations, not interrogations. Instead of heavy agendas, use prompts like:

"What do people misunderstand about our city?"

"What's something this community has taught you?"

Encourage laughter, stories, and interaction. Mix generations, industries, or neighborhoods for unexpected insights. People open up more when they don't feel like they're being studied.

Scroll & Ask: *Your community is already talking, are you listening?*

Social media is full of unofficial community commentary. Pay attention to neighborhood groups, local hashtags, and comment threads. You can also spark conversation on city and partner channels with fun, low-barrier prompts, like:

"Describe our city in 3 emojis."

"What's the most underrated spot in town?"

"Finish this: Only in [City Name]: ____."

Have some fun. Don't be afraid of the negative (as long as it isn't taken too far). Engage with responses, share/repost them, reference their comments (when appropriate and respectful), and show people their voice matters. And if a comment warrants an offline conversation, offer up that opportunity, too.



PERSONALITY

KEEP IT REAL. MAKE IT RESONATE.

Every community has a personality. It shows up in the way people greet each other, the local slang or inside jokes, the festivals that come back year after year, even the way people come together during tough times.

As city communicators, your job isn't to sound "governmental" or official. It's to sound like your community – real, grounded, and familiar. The more your messages reflect local character, the more people trust what they hear. Not every message needs to be clever or quirky. It just needs to feel honest and human.

Let your city's character guide how you show up in emails, signs, posts, videos, and events. It's not about polish. It's about connection.

Finding Strengths in Stereotypes

One way to uncover your community's character is by flipping the lines you hear too often. Listen to those offhand comments — like "the city never listens" or "we're in the middle of nowhere." The Flip-It exercise (see *Flip-It Factory template*) helps reframe these with empathy and insight. Often there's a hidden truth and a hidden strength.

Could "middle of nowhere" mean closer to nature or a perfect escape? Does "the city never listens" reveal a chance to follow-up or celebrate city services? These flips can spark powerful, people-centered messages that truly connect.

This isn't spin. It's clarity. It's about listening first.



Check out the next page for some simple, fun ways to reflect your community's voice and bring its personality to life.



Local Lens Photo Contest

Let residents and business owners show what they love most about your community — through their eyes.

Ask for photo submissions with categories like Best View in Town, Most Underrated Spot, or Throwback (Past Meets Present).

Display entries at City Hall, your website, social media, or turn them into a community calendar or mural.

This contest invites people to share what matters to them, relate to their community, and helps others see familiar places in new ways.



Celebrate Local Social Media Campaign

Give the community a chance to share community insights, in their own words. Use simple, voice-driven prompts like:

“This is where I go to recharge.”

“This place brings back memories because...”

“You really haven’t experienced our town until...”

Pair short quotes with candid photos, local history tidbits, and fun facts. Use a consistent hashtag and encourage community contributions.

It’s real, relatable, and gives your feed a friendly, community-first tone.



Hidden Gems Scavenger Hunt

Turn local pride into a community game and uncover spots even longtime residents may have missed.

Ask city staff, community partners, or use your *Celebrate Local* campaign to gather hidden gem recommendations.

Then create a printable or digital treasure map featuring locally-owned businesses, scenic views, unexpected photo ops, historic sites, unique eats, or anywhere that shows off your city’s authentic vibe.

Bonus: It’s also a great addition to relocation guides, new resident welcome kits, and seasonal shopping promos or ideas.



PURPOSE

TRUST STARTS WITH INTENT

Every message you send is an opportunity to connect. Whether you're announcing roadwork, explaining a budget, or reminding people where to vote, your communications should be rooted in purpose. People sense the intention behind your words, and over time, that builds something deeper: trust.

Purpose doesn't mean overthinking every sentence. It means knowing why you're sharing something, who it's for, and how it helps. When that intention leads the way, your message becomes more than just information – it becomes part of the relationship between your city and your community.

Purpose is what keeps your messaging from becoming noise. It's the reason behind the words, and it's what turns routine updates into something meaningful. People are more likely to listen, believe, and engage when they feel like it's meant for them, not just sent to them.

That doesn't mean every message has to be profound. Purpose might look like explaining a new policy in plain language, giving people a heads-up before construction starts, or checking in on what your community needs to hear, not just what you need to say.

Before you hit send, pause and ask yourself:

What's the real reason we're sharing this?

Does it feel honest, clear, and worth someone's time?

Purposeful messages create understanding, and that's where trust begins.

PITCH PERFECT:

Making the Case for Strategic Communications and Engagement

Why It's Worth the Time

In a world full of noise, clear, consistent, and human communication cuts through. But in local government, it's more than just getting attention – it's about earning trust, building relationships, and helping people feel seen and included in the decisions that affect them.

Investing in communication and engagement isn't a luxury. It's a responsibility. When done with purpose, it reduces confusion, increases participation, and supports everything from capital projects to employee morale. It helps your team work smarter and your community feel heard.

Communication isn't just what you say. It's how you show up.

Use these questions to guide city leadership conversations around communication strategy:

- ? Why should residents trust what the city says?**
- ? Why should local government feel approachable?**
- ? Why should staff feel proud to share the city's message?**

When your city leads with trust and care, you don't just react to perception – you shape how people experience local government.



Talking with city leaders? Focus on what communication makes possible: trust, connection, and better outcomes. Ask: *What do we want people to feel when they engage with the city?*

Framing communication as a shared, essential service – not just a support function – makes it easier to champion, support, and carry forward.

TALKING POINTS FOR CITY LEADERS & BUDGET CONVERSATIONS



Strong communication builds stronger communities

Clear messaging, regular outreach, and authentic engagement help residents better understand decisions and feel more connected to local government.



Prevents frustration, reduces misinformation, and saves time

Answering questions before they become complaints leads to fewer phone calls, clearer expectations, and smoother projects.



Builds internal trust, too

City staff benefit from consistent, respectful, and timely internal communication. It boosts morale, clarity, and cross-departmental collaboration.



A plan built for your community makes all the difference

Effective communication doesn't happen by accident. With a clear plan and strong support, small teams can do big things. Community-led stories, social content, compelling visuals, and proactive outreach go a long way.



Trust is your strongest asset, and it's built in the everyday

In local government, trust isn't automatic. It's earned through transparency, consistency, and how you show up in everyday communication. Every message, big or small, is a chance to build that trust. Prioritizing communication is how you strengthen public confidence, even in tough conversations.

Strong communication doesn't just make things look better – it makes everything work better. It brings clarity to complex issues, builds bridges between departments and residents, and helps your city lead with purpose and trust. When you invest in communication, you invest in people and in a community that feels informed, included, and proud to be part of the story.

THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY



MOUTH

Describe what you say when giving an elevator speech about your community.



EYES

How would you describe the residents of your community?



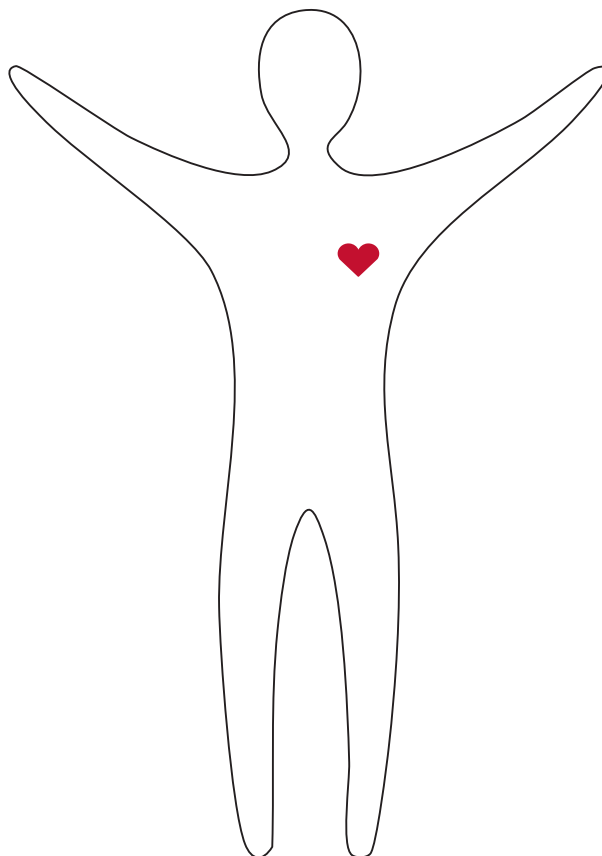
BRAIN

What is the most innovative trait of your community?



NOSE

What are your favorite smells that you can find throughout your community?



EARS

What do you hear when talking to residents about your community?



HANDS

What is the first place you would point out to someone new in your community?



CLOTHES

How do you typically dress? Is it more casual or dressy?



HEART

How do you feel about your community? What do you love or dislike?



FEET

Where is your favorite place to go in your community?

FLIP-IT FACTORY

Every community has heard it: a comment, a joke, or a stereotype that doesn't tell the whole story. This worksheet helps you reframe that outdated perception and uncover a more accurate, empowering narrative. **Use this exercise to find messaging themes, campaign taglines, or community pride statements rooted in truth and uniquely yours.**

THE STEREOTYPE

What do people say about your town that feels negative or misunderstood?

Keep it real, no sugarcoating!

FLIP IT

How can you reframe the original comment as an asset or advantage? Use language that's confident, fresh, or a little unexpected.

Turn that negative into a bridge, something to lean into, build from, or clarify. Bonus points for wit and warmth.

THE TRUTH

What's the *real* story underneath? What's interesting about this perception when you look closer?

Think: What is the underlying meaning of the comment? What doesn't City Hall see or understand?

CRAFT A MESSAGE

Now put your flipped idea into 1–2 punchy lines. These could become a campaign slogan, billboard, or social media series. Bonus: Brainstorm visuals/images that would bring it home.

Keep it short, catchy, and true to your town's voice.

Examples:

THE STEREOTYPE

"The city never listens."

TRUTH:

We haven't always closed the loop or shared follow-up clearly, even when good work is happening behind the scenes.

FLIP:

We're not just listening, we're following through and showing what's next.

MESSAGE IDEAS:

"Your voice matters."

"Listening is where action begins."

GET WORDY WIT IT

Putting words to what makes your community work, wow, and win.



Make sure your city's communications sound like your community, not AI or a press release template.

This quick exercise helps you find words that reflect your people, pace, and personality. These word pairings can shape your tone of voice, social media captions, email intros, signage language, and even internal newsletters.

1. Start With What You Heard

From listening sessions, focus groups, or local quotes — jot down a few key themes, strengths, or values your community shared.

Examples: Real people. Hard work. Open space. Creative energy. Welcoming. Resilient. Bold. Safe. Gritty. Fun. Outdoors. Rooted.

2. Build Your Word Bank

Using what you heard — and what you know — list out words that describe your community's:

- People
- Vibe/personality
- Landscape or setting
- Values or beliefs
- Rhythms/lifestyle

People: _____

Vibe: _____

Place: _____

Values: _____

Lifestyle: _____

3. Pair It Up: Try Some Combos

Now experiment with short, punchy word pairings using what you've written above. Think: witty + welcoming, quiet + strong, creative + grounded.

Aim for 2–3 words that contrast, complement, or surprise.

- _____ + _____
- _____ + _____
- _____ + _____

NEED HELP?

This process takes a lot of engagement, focus groups, and creativity. If your team is small or stretched thin, we can strategize outreach or help create something great, and authentic!



Pro Tip:

This exercise also works great for economic development needs and event promotions.

LET'S CONNECT!



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