

## Citizen Newsletters: Are They Worth the Trouble?

*Wendy L. Hassett*

A citizen's image of his or her community is affected every day by a host of things, like the appearance of rights-of-way, interactions with local government employees, articles in the local newspaper, the existence or absence of litter and potholes, or the feeling of community a person can get just by walking down the street. A positive relationship between a local government and the citizens it serves is critical for public administrators and managers to establish and cultivate.

Localities trying to tackle the challenge of maintaining or even improving their image may take any of a number of different paths to do so. Typical strategies include press releases, public speaking, civic programs, radio programs, and the like. There is no question that negative stories involving a city or county make the news. Too often, it is the more positive, image-building stories that are ignored by the press.

These positive stories—about the proactive steps a locality is taking, innovative programs offered, or national awards or recognition received—could enhance the city or county's image if citizens were made aware of them. Newspapers often do not find newsworthy the more mundane yet critical, community-related information about local achievements, public meeting times, local board vacancies, holiday closures, changed trash collection schedules, or special local cable programming.

When it comes to addressing the image of a community and its communications with residents, several issues should be considered:

**Results are what matters.** If the information generated by the media is not accurate or does not reach the intended audience, it makes no difference how many and how widely press releases have been distributed. In the same way, public hearings are not successful if citizens do not attend and express their opinions.

**Resources are limited.** As local governments with vast responsibilities and even more community "wants," we are constantly challenged to do more with less. Would a public relations campaign to increase communication with citizens rank higher on the list of priorities than school funding, street

maintenance, additional police officers, or new sidewalks? Probably not. In order to get the most for each public dollar, it is important to leverage public dollars with private dollars, grant funds, or other means to make our scarce public resources stretch further—both in addressing these fundamental government concerns and in communicating to citizens.

**A “general public” does not really exist.** Seniors care about different things than do working mothers; business executives have different priorities from college students; teenagers get their information differently than the rest of us do. Believe it or not, everyone does not subscribe to the local newspaper, and only a portion of the community relies on the local radio stations for news updates and reports. It is a challenge for us, then, as city and county administrators, to get pertinent information out to all of our citizens in a way that is effective, appealing, and useful.

What, then, is the best way to achieve the goal of an interactive government that communicates effectively with all of its citizens? Using multiple methods is probably the most effective approach. As we challenge ourselves to be innovative and to find new and better ways of doing things, we have tried to identify new methods, both to convey information to our citizens and also to hear what the citizens have to say about us.

Localities can establish Web sites, which have been found to be effective tools to get specialized information to citizens. Of course, segments of the population lack access to the Internet. In some places, then, an annual citizen survey is a major means used to involve and engage citizens in a dialogue about satisfaction with the performance of existing services and about community desires for new services. In spite of the various efforts made, there seems always to be a desire—especially among elected officials—for more and better communication channels.

### **Auburn’s Experience**

Auburn, Alabama, decided in early 2000 to publish and distribute a monthly direct-mail newsletter to its citizens. Since that time, city administrators have found that a newsletter is a potent tool they can use to communicate directly to the citizenry without having to rely on the local newspapers to filter (or, worse, ignore) stories or pertinent information that managers want to get “out there.” Although the concept of a newsletter was not new, *Open Line* was this city’s first attempt at producing a newsletter for its citizens.

In March 2000, the first issue was sent to readers with a letter of introduction from the mayor as the lead story. In explaining the purpose of the newsletter, the mayor stated, “We want very much to have an ‘open line’ of communication between you and your city government.” Since that time, the periodical has proven to be a cost-effective vehicle for communicating accurate, timely,

objective, and important information that residents can use in their everyday lives.

## **Expenditures**

The costs of producing and distributing a monthly newsletter can get out of control quickly. Postage alone can make the undertaking cost-prohibitive for some communities. But when it comes to fostering a positive public image and making a direct link to residents on a monthly basis, the benefits far outweigh the expenses. There are, however, several ways to reduce costs.

To save on **postage**, include the publication in a monthly mailing already being sent to all citizens, like the water bill. The newsletter should be designed (size, length, and weight) to be inserted into an envelope without costing additional postage. If this approach is used, only simple coordination between the department producing the newsletter and the one sending out the mailing is needed.

In Auburn, a conversion from a card billing system to an envelope billing system actually provided cost savings in billings for the water utility. At the same time, it allowed the inclusion of the newsletter. Local governments without this option might consider contacting another local utility to request that it include the newsletter in its bill.

Editing and composition can be done in-house on existing staff time. Most articles can be written from materials already being produced in the manager's office, such as press releases, e-mails, and memorandums or other communications to elected officials. A great deal of staff time spent in composing new stories should not be necessary, as the manager already is updating the council and citizens on projects and programs in other ways. Department heads who want to get specific information into the newsletter can submit their articles to the newsletter coordinator.

Obtain **competitive printing prices**. If the newsletter is attractive and professional in quality and has the reputation of being the timely and accurate voice of the local government, it will spark the interest of printing companies, who most likely will compete to print it. Since the introduction of the newsletter in Auburn, local and regional printing companies have battled to get the business and the chance to say they print the city's newsletter.

Regarding **design** considerations, remember that a newsletter printed in one color costs substantially less than one with two or more colors. At present, printing 14,000 copies costs the city approximately \$1,300 per month, which is less than 10 cents per household per month. In addition, paper costs vary substantially. The paper chosen should look professional while still being cost-effective. As for **length**, the newsletter should be short enough that it does not

require a major time commitment but long enough to offer articles and information of substance.

### **Benefits and Gains**

Since the introduction of *Open Line*, Auburn has realized many direct and indirect benefits. The newsletter:

**Improves public relations.** Citizens' response to the newsletter has been overwhelmingly positive. The general sentiment from the community is that it makes residents feel that they know what is going on. Current contact information, including phone numbers and e-mail addresses for councilmembers, city manager, assistant city manager, and department heads, is included in each issue. After Auburn received a request to include contact information for the city schools superintendent, this information was added as well. As comments and suggestions are received from the staff and the public, modifications are made in an effort to make the newsletter increasingly useful to residents.

**Introduces new services.** After reading about the events, issues, and new services that are featured, citizens increasingly show up to participate, become involved in, and sign up for city services and programs. The excellent response to new programs highlighted in the newsletter indicates that the message is getting across.

For example, a newly introduced Young Adult Coffeehouse, offered by the city library and featured in *Open Line*, solicited such overwhelming response that the program was converted into a regular program. Citizens who bought donation bricks for a newly constructed veterans' memorial mentioned that they had learned about the project through the newsletter.

**Highlights and supports existing services.** In addition to increased publicity for new programs, existing programs have been featured to encourage additional participation. Current programs that have received excellent responses have included the recycling program, the city library's children's reading program, the white-goods disposal program, and the roll-out-cart option for home garbage service.

For example, after the roll-out garbage-cart service option was spotlighted in the July issue, the environmental services director noticed a sudden increase in the number of requests for this service. A total of 133 requests for cart service came in during July, compared with 55 during June. "Most of the citizens said they had read about the carts in *Open Line*," said Environmental Services Director Al Davis.

**Increases organizational efficiency and effectiveness.** Before the newsletter, city departments relied almost exclusively on press releases sent to the media in an effort to get publicity for their programs or projects. Newspapers and radio often could not give coverage because of time and space restrictions. And if the newspaper did not publish the information or published it incorrectly, all efforts were in vain. It is not, however, the newspaper's job to make sure that citizens have all the information they need about services and municipal projects. Newspapers exist to sell their papers and make a profit. It is up to the city to disseminate information on its own events and services.

**Reaches the unreachable.** In spite of the most aggressive publicity campaigns, too often staff members have heard that the city's message has not been getting to the audience it was trying to reach. What's more, a large percentage of residents do not subscribe to the local paper or listen to local news stations. *Open Line* is offering another way of communicating with these citizens.

City administration now can submit ideas for news stories with the assurance that the stories will arrive at each Auburn household with accurate and timely information. The newspaper and radio still are used; however, they now serve as secondary or supplemental resources instead of the primary ones.

**Improves news coverage.** Local newspaper reporters have told city staff that they use the newsletter for story ideas. This tool has effectively assisted in moving issues of city concern onto the public agenda.

**Communicates the "real story."** The rumor mill is alive in all localities. Regardless of the city's best efforts to publicize the rationale behind administrative or policy decisions, there seems to be a segment of the community that prefers to believe in and propagate the inept or conspiracy theories that circulate. *Open Line* enables the manager to go "head to head" with the rumor mill in Auburn and to get out the truth behind the story.

Traffic congestion caused by a narrow overpass over the interstate, for instance, raised a question as to why nothing was being done to widen the overpass. In reality, the city had been quite active in urging the state to make the necessary improvements, which had been committed to by the state department of transportation and the former governor on several occasions.

Years passed, and still no work had begun. The manager and mayor made numerous phone calls, wrote many letters, and went on several visits to the capital to speed along the progress of this commitment. In the meantime, citizens were becoming increasingly weary of the traffic congestion at this location and had begun to complain. One by one, they were told that the project was in the hands of the state and not the city, and they were urged to contact state representatives.

Although effective, this communication process was slow. To set the record straight on a larger scale, this story was chosen as the cover article in the newsletter, complete with a picture of the traffic congestion that was all too familiar both to the citizens and to city government.

### **Advice on Potential Pitfalls**

**Keep it short. Keep it fresh.** As a society, we are bombarded with information, most of which we filter out. To encourage citizens to take the time to read a newsletter, articles must be kept short, to-the-point, and interesting. The newsletter also must have an appealing design and layout, using graphs and pictures when possible. Varying the layout with new column breaks, content, and color also will help to keep the reader's attention.

**Ask yourself: Whose newsletter is it?** Any locality undertaking the production and distribution of a newsletter should keep in mind that this is a publication of the local government and not of the garden club, the United Way, or the county commission. Inevitably, clubs and nonprofit organizations will ask to advertise their events or fundraisers. A strict policy on what is and is not a city-related program is important to protect the limited space available to publicize the local government's news.

**Consider distribution.** Depending on the method of distribution used, as mentioned, some citizens may not receive the newsletter. If possible, it should be made available to them through other means. Residents of assisted-living facilities and nursing homes, as well as university students living on campus, do not receive water bills. Therefore, issues of *Open Line* are mailed directly to these locations for internal distribution. Additional copies are made available at the city hall and library. Posting and archiving the newsletter on the city's Web site ([www.auburnalabama.org](http://www.auburnalabama.org)) allows interested parties worldwide to access the newsletter without costing the city additional postage and staff time to prepare special mailings.

**Achieve credibility.** Getting the newsletter out on time, with accurate information, is important. Articles that contain mistakes, grammatical errors, or omissions will hamper the credibility of the newsletter and the city. On the other hand, if the newsletter is high-quality and accurate, it will enhance the community's image. Thus, every effort must be made to get the newsletter out on schedule while being as accurate as possible.

**Avoid political uses.** It is especially important for managers and administrators to make sure that a newsletter is not used to support or denounce the actions of specific councilmembers or to serve as the mouthpiece for an elected official. Contact information for elected officials can and should be included in the publication to facilitate open channels of communication

with the citizenry, but the newsletter's purpose and political boundaries should be made clear at the inception.

### **Positive Image**

In Auburn, the newsletter has elicited strong positive feedback from citizens and city management. As exemplified by *Open Line*, a citizen newsletter can be an effective, long-term tool with which to communicate directly with citizens. It is part of a local government's obligation in our democratic system to keep the public well informed. And, for the locality to be effective, it must maintain a positive public image, which can be a constant challenge. A citizen newsletter allows a locality to address these concerns.

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*Wendy L. Hassett is assistant city manager, Auburn, Alabama.*

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