

Perceptions of public service and improving your city's image

by William Costick

You work hard. You know your job. You get things done. You keep your campaign commitments. So why should you have to worry about your image in the community? Why should you have to worry about your city's image?

Citizen awareness and interaction between citizens and officials can have a powerful impact on community opinion, citizens' support for their local government, and their respect for elected officers and appointed officials.

Many cities rank improving and maintaining image right along with providing services in importance to the city, its sustained growth and prosperity.

There are several measures city officials can take to enhance their community's image and the level of respect and support both elected and appointed city/village officers and employees might enjoy. This article explores several ideas, all of which can be implemented on a shoestring budget.

The first challenge of public service

Achieving resident support rather than ire can be as simple as listening to concerns. Residents may come to council meetings with false expectations and information. Listen carefully and respond. If you don't know the answer to a question, take the resident's name, find the answer and call that person. If residents feel you truly care, and that you are doing your best to help them, a negative answer becomes less important.

Perceptions shape opinion

Public opinion and the perceptions citizens hold toward their community can be shaped by a single incident or a number of issues that elected officials can't always control. A negative encounter with the police, strong disagreement over a homeowner's property assessment, and a controversial re-zoning are examples. Other examples that could shape attitudes and feelings about local government are:

- How do elected officials treat each other in public?
- How safe is the community perceived to be?
- Is the water supply acceptable?
- Are the ball fields and parks mowed on time?
- Is there adequate fire protection equipment?
- Are streets smooth and clean?
- Are taxes perceived as too high?
- Do officials and staff listen to citizens?

Beat the naysayers to the punch

The public's attitude toward its government can be apathetic and at times, very cynical. Media coverage of national and state politics and issues can color public perceptions about government in general and even how people view all elected officials. Don't let that cynicism – or negative media coverage – dictate your community's image. If you don't make the effort to promote your city, someone else will – sometimes to the negative. Call the media when something positive happens in the city that you want others to know about. As an elected official, you must be the ambassador for your own community. Blow your own horn, market your efforts.

Quest for public confidence

The quest for public confidence has to be an overriding goal of all locally elected and appointed officials. The challenge of gaining public confidence has been placed in five broad categories:

Leadership Challenge: How can municipalities attract and create opportunities for skilled leaders willing to tackle the tough issues of fiscal crises, constant public exposure, pay and compensation shortcomings, and questions over media fairness?

Workforce Challenge: To provide quality services, a well-trained and skilled workforce is essential. However, municipal employers face daunting competing forces:

- Economic competition from the private sector for the most talented people
- Lower wages for public employment
- Inadequate training budgets
- Pressures that emphasize productivity yet lack incentives
- A cultural legacy of devalued work

Performance Challenge: Because they are accountable to taxpayers, public employees must perform equal to or better than those in the private sector, and strive for continuous improvement. How can local governments develop an organizational culture that nurtures an efficient and responsive workforce?

Fiscal Challenge: How do we create a positive feeling about the efficiency and stewardship of the city's operations, delivery of services, and fiscal integrity?

Ethics and Trust: Our system of democratic government is sustained by public trust. How do we prevent the improper actions of one member of a locally elected board from reflecting negatively on the entire city or village government?

What does this all mean?

Residents want elected officials to champion the efforts to maintain the quality of life they desire. Resident support of image can translate to support of millages or zoning changes. The perception of a professional staff working for the best interest of its citizens, establishes trust. Trust translates to support and a positive image.

Improving your municipal image

What will it take to improve your community's image? Only you can assess what needs to be changed, what needs to be implemented and what resources are available to truly make a difference.

Are we talking a lot of money? No! "Public service" is developing a genuine positive and helpful attitude through the delivery of municipal services and through respectful personal interaction with the public.

The most helpful thing you can do is identify a vision for the future. As with any strategic planning process, there will be a number of goals and/or objectives. These don't have to be sophisticated; they can be simple and concise, possibly a list of things to do or to be achieved within a certain time frame.

Next, you must develop and maintain a culture of continuous improvement. To attain high quality performance you must find a means of sharing the vision, values and goals through frequent training, interaction and conscientious feedback. Extensive entry-level training and re-training of existing employees is essential to sharing and carrying out your public service goals. These same concepts can be applied to elected officials and appointed citizen volunteers as well.

It's never too late to start. Being *proactive* in building a positive image is easier than being *reactive* to a negative image. Your image is only as good as the effort you expend today and tomorrow.

What else can be done?

First, citizens must be informed about their local government and all of its responsibilities. Second, there must be frequent formal interaction with the public. Third, to every extent possible, requests, concerns and complaints must be addressed. Fourth, your council must examine and take steps to improve its organizational image. Finally, performance must be above any standard of average.

Communicate the importance of local government

- Use every opportunity to effectively, in a positive setting, talk to citizen groups, civic clubs, neighborhood associations, etc.
- Promote media relations – use cable TV to your advantage.
- Think public relations – photo opportunities for all successful projects.
- Speak to senior citizens' groups and to school children at all levels.
- Publish city newsletters and public information project letters. (Specific project information letters are excellent means of transmitting factual information to citizens and reaching the hard to reach.)

Create opportunities to interact with the public

- Host open houses at municipal facilities several times a year.
- Attend and speak at neighborhood meetings and civic club meetings.
- Use citizen committees or invite citizens to participate in a crime or fire prevention program, or a community cleanup or blight elimination program.
- Congratulate residents and business owners for their achievements.

Think about the good things going on in your municipality. Send out press releases or place notices on bulletin boards in the city hall. Provide information, whenever possible, at meetings or other events to which elected officials are invited.

Providing information to residents is key. It's always better to provide too much information, than not enough.

Take care of business

A professional image when handling city business goes a long way. Citizen complaints can be viewed as opportunities to help residents.

Answer requests and resolve complaints as promptly as possible. If answers must be delayed, call citizens and give them a schedule. If you must say no, explain why. If another jurisdiction is responsible, assist citizens with contacts. Let everyone involved know what action has been taken to resolve a complaint. Then, document the complaint resolution for future reference.

Take care of your visible assets

Your city or village has a fragile image. It is dependent not only on these less tangible feelings about service and responsiveness, but also on more tangible factors such as physical appearance and maintenance. If you don't enhance the visible characteristics of a community, all the teamwork in the world may not get you to the new image you want to achieve.

It's the difference we often see in a high-end resort community where streets are always clean and properties neatly landscaped, parks are graced with gazebos or lovely water features and ornate street lights illuminate the evening. Although these things cost money, these image factors every community should consider:

- Do your workers have a positive attitude, a highly visible work ethic and professional appearance?
- Are city buildings, facilities, parks, pump stations and grounds well maintained? What message do they convey?
- Are public works infrastructure such as streets, road sides, signs, drains and parking lots well maintained and litter free?
- Is the maintenance equipment used by the city well maintained? How about fire and police vehicles?
- How do your public road rights-of-way look? If you keep them clean, private property owners will follow suit.

Encourage superior performance

Average isn't good enough. If you truly want to improve your image every opportunity to excel must be exercised. While there is no magic formula to achieve excellence, there are some practical things you may want to consider:

- Examine how you conduct public meetings, especially city or village council meetings. Is the agenda efficient? Do you use a consent agenda? Are procedures and time limits for public speakers reasonable? Is there a problem with civility? How these meetings are conducted can greatly influence public opinion.
- Consider using "information meetings" prior to public hearings for major capital projects, new municipal programs, special assessment projects (even to kick off initiatory petitions), or for controversial zoning or land use issues. These preliminary information meetings can build confidence in local government because they are not subject to the normal public hearing time constraints as when part of a regular public meeting agenda.
- Hold annual or semi-annual goal setting or strategic planning meetings as an entire council and possibly at certain times with a particular board such as a planning commission.
- Invite citizens to help develop a five or ten-year plan for the community.
- Maintain good relations with neighboring communities.

- Are you proud to show guests around town? Make the landscape look attractive by adding flowers and trees, cleaning up litter and restoring blighted areas. If the budget is tight, invite civic clubs, garden clubs, Scouts, or other youth groups to adopt and maintain public gardens.

Allowing citizens to feel involved in their community is critical. Operate in an atmosphere of openness; people like to think they know what's going on in their community. Always be honest with the citizens and the media.

Public service is a noble and worthy calling. It is up to those working today in the public sector, in leadership roles in government, to influence and mold perceptions about the level of government they serve. Make your community's government something special!

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This article is reprinted with permission from the January/February 2006 issue of *Michigan Municipal Review* magazine, published by the Michigan Municipal League.