

TO: HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

FROM: CITY MANAGER

DEPARTMENT: CITY MANAGER

DATE: MAY 3, 2004

CMR: 235:04

SUBJECT: CITYWIDE REVIEW OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

This is an informational report and no Council action is required.

BACKGROUND

During the budget hearings for the 2003-05 budget, some City Council Members expressed interest in exploring ways to reduce public communications costs in the context of overall budget reductions. In response to Council concerns, public communications staff conducted an internal review of publications, focusing on identifying ways to reduce costs while maintaining and enhancing open communication with residents, which is increasingly important during difficult times.

This review was done with the cooperation of all City departments, under the guidance of the City Auditor. This report includes recommendations and an implementation strategy.

DISCUSSION

The citywide communications review had several parts:

- Focus group on *CityPages*, the City's newsletter for residents and businesses (discussed in depth in this report)
- Citywide publications inventory and review, and individual discussion with departments
- Peer review by external experts in local government communications
- Discussion and review by City Auditor

CITYPAGES FOCUS GROUP

Because there were City Council questions about the cost and efficacy of the City's newsletter, staff held a focus group to learn directly from residents their thoughts and suggestions. The group of seven residents was self-selected from a large group of invitees. Of the seven participants, three had personal or professional experience with producing newsletters.

The *CityPages* focus group session (a 1-½ hour meeting held at City Hall) was in three parts:

1. a discussion of the existing *CityPages*, based on four issues which the participants had rated prior to the meeting. (Attachment A)
2. a review of other cities' newsletter publications to glean ideas in three categories: Distribution, Content, and Style. (Attachment B)
3. a brainstorming session on ways to improve *CityPages* while reducing costs. (Attachment C)

CITYWIDE PUBLICATIONS INVENTORY AND REVIEW

Through the Public Information Committee (a group representing various City departments), communications staff gathered 102 samples of major citywide publications and information about their design and production. The estimated \$300,000 spent by departments for outside design and printing of these pieces represents a substantial investment in communication (this figure does not include staff costs, which are undetermined). Therefore, staff reviewed them from a citywide perspective and analyzed them for overall quality, effectiveness, appropriateness, and consistency of message. In addition, staff looked for opportunities for cooperative efforts where audiences and distribution schedules overlapped, in order to maximize the dollars spent.

Communications staff met individually with departments to discuss the departments' communication goals, their challenges, their efforts at cost savings, and future communications plans.

The discussions showed:

1. COST: Outside printing and design costs are more than \$300,000

About half of the expenditure for outside printing comes from Enterprise Funds, including Utilities, and half from the General Fund.

City departments are well aware of the need to cut costs and in 2002-03, made cuts in publications totaling \$42,000. Efforts in 2002-03 to strengthen the bottom line achieved cost savings by:

- Eliminating publications
- Reducing size or frequency of publication
- Culling mailing list and printing fewer copies
- Simplifying design to reduce printing costs (e.g., from 4-color to 2-color)
- Redesigning publication to allow in-house printing
- Modifying content to have a longer “shelf life”
- Reducing *CityPages* from 8 pages to 4 and re-bidding the design

2. DESIGN: Quality of publications varies widely

Departments have differing levels of resources for print communications. Some departments have designers on contract. There are at least two graphic designers who are hourly City employees, but this resource is not widely known or shared. Some departments rely on staff with other responsibilities but who have experience with a page layout program.

3. STANDARDS: There is no standardization of paper, logos, typeface, design or format.

There is no overall look and feel to City of Palo Alto publications. Each department (and in some cases, division) has its own identity, which is sometimes used in conjunction with the City logo and sometimes not. In addition, there are inconsistencies within departments in terms of document look and quality.

4. CROSS-MARKETING: Departments are not pursuing cross-department opportunities.

Staff found a high degree of dedication by departments to communicating with “their” customers. There have been few efforts to share customer lists or marketing opportunities, with little recognition that Library customers also take Recreation classes and may be interested in City Council news, for instance. Therefore, we are missing opportunities to encourage more civic engagement.

5. STRATEGY: In some departments, communication efforts seem to be driven by available resources rather than careful planning and execution

Utilities and Community Services are unique in having on-staff or contract employees dedicated to the communications function. In other departments, the communications function is performed by individuals on an ad hoc basis. For instance, an engineer or a librarian may handle public outreach on his or her particular project. On occasion, the communications staff in the City Manager’s office are asked to assist.

PEER REVIEW

The City Manager and communications staff met with Scott Summerfield, SAE Communications, and Tom Mannheim, City of San Jose Public Outreach Manager, to discuss Palo Alto communications practices and publications in relation to best practices of other cities.

Summerfield and Mannheim suggested the following ideas that work well in other cities and are aimed at achieving cost efficiencies while increasing the strategic focus of communications.

CityPages

Summerfield and Mannheim agreed that a City newsletter is standard practice and serves an important function – that of providing “straight from the horse’s mouth” information to residents. They echoed the feeling of the focus group that an improved *CityPages* could function as an all-in-one information source if combined with regular features on topics that are now covered in separate mailings, such as recycling and recreation classes. In addition to saving money, combining the publications would serve to broaden the exposure for each special interest area and would help ensure a consistent message to residents from City government.

Design Standards / Basic Elements

The communication consultants discussed establishing the use of consistent design standards for publications, which is considered a best practice by most cities and the vast majority of private companies. They suggested an inter-departmental group of high-level decision makers take the following steps:

1. Work on a plan for design and implementation of a City of Palo Alto brand to be used consistently throughout City communications.
2. Suggest basic elements to be included in all City documents, such as a header or footer including contact information, ADA notification and a recycling symbol. (There are currently no standards across departments.)
3. Champion use of a consistent City identity in their departments.

Cross-marketing and Coordination of Key Messages

Another best practice that is desirable is coordination of messages at a high level. This does not mean that communication should be centralized, the consultants stated, but that all publications should be reviewed by the City Manager’s Office to ensure that there is consistency of method and message. A model for this is the structure of the City’s approval process for web communications, which requires review by communications staff before posting. This prevents conflicting

messages from being sent by different departments, prevents duplication of work, and makes possible the strategic use of communication plans and resources.

To remain well-informed about various department news and issues, communications staff from the City Manager's Office should have "beats" that they cover, much like reporters. They should attend department staff meetings to find out what's new and what needs to be communicated to a wider audience, and also to share a city-wide perspective. This extra effort ensures bottom-up news is shared with the larger organization and that top-down messages are widely communicated and understood as well.

Frank's Memo

Frank's Weekly Memo is a successful model for an electronic newsletter and has been copied by other cities. The consultants suggested ways to increase the distribution as well as more attractive ways to present the information and the e-mail notification.

Controlling design costs

Mannheim and Summerfield suggested several ways to decrease design costs.

- Consolidate design projects and get competitive bids
- Identify and use in-house (hourly) designers. The hourly rate for staff is much lower than for outside designers
- Require graphic artists to develop templates that can be customized by City staff and stop re-designing the same materials year after year if only an update is needed

City Web Site

The consultants did not review the City's web site, but shared some best practices from other cities:

- have a recognizable, consistent look and feel to web site
- organize the site by function, not department
- exercise quality control in messaging and design
- empower and encourage department contacts to keep sections up to date
- make web site part of overall strategic communications plan
- continue producing print publications to ensure access to information for all audiences

CITY AUDITOR ROLE

During the planning and implementation of this review, the City Auditor contributed the following:

- Defined scope of the review
- Reviewed findings
- Made recommendations based on findings and in consultation with staff
- Will review actions and timeline periodically
- Worked with staff to analyze public communications budget. Revisions will appear in proposed 2004-05 budget.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further efficiencies in print publications can be achieved by

- Integrating general information publications into *CityPages* or the *Enjoy!* catalog
- Consolidating printing and design contracts
- Employing standard elements and templates
- Assigning City Manager’s Office public communications staff the role of oversight and approval of city publications

ACTION PLAN

The City Manager and City Auditor recommend the following actions and timeline for implementation:

Communications Area	Objective	Action	Timeline/ responsibility
Coordination	Increase communication among departments at staff level	Use cross-departmental committee to discuss communication issues	Done
	Keep current on all department issues and news to shape citywide perspective	Establish “beat” system for CMO staff to attend dept. meetings	Done
	Better coordinate major city publications such as <i>CityPages</i> , <i>Enjoy!</i> catalog, and utility bill inserts to increase effectiveness and reduce costs	Begin coordination by City Manager’s Office (CMO)	July 2004 (CMO)

Communications Area	Objective	Action	Timeline/ responsibility
Cross-marketing	Take advantage of opportunities to expand “customer base” for each service or department	Use <i>Enjoy!</i> catalog and <i>CityPages</i> to increase awareness of City services and promote civic participation	Dec. 2004 (CMO)
	Explore ways to cross market	Compile inventory of customer lists	Dec. 2004 (PIC)
Citywide standards	Achieve best practice of consistent look and feel for City publications	Coordinate publications through CMO to ensure message consistency and publication quality	July 2004
	Increase effectiveness of City publications	Prepare guidelines for design standards	December 2004 (CMO)
Printing and graphic design	Reduce printing costs	Use single contractor (in-house or contract) for most City publications to ensure consistency and best price	December 2004
	Reduce design costs	Bid business to single vendor if feasible to improve consistency and pricing	As contracts expire
		Have designers provide templates that can be re-used in future years	July 2004
City web site	Increase effectiveness of web search	Re-tool search engine to provide more meaningful results	Ongoing
	Organize web site around services, not departments; improve usability	Identify resources to do re-design	2005, or when resources allow

Communications Area	Objective	Action	Timeline/ responsibility
City Web Site (cont.)	Improve consistency and coordination of messages and design	Continue coordination of content through CMO	Ongoing
<i>CityPages</i>	Reduce design costs	Bid out design	Done
	Reduce printing costs	Reduce number of pages	Done
	Enhance effectiveness of newsletter in delivering news on City issues	Use comments from focus group and experts to redesign content	Ongoing
	Share costs with enterprise funds and other departments	Investigate opportunities to integrate City publications for optimum distribution and cost savings	August 2004
Frank's Weekly Memo	Enhance effectiveness and increase audience	Redesign e-mail notification to provide summaries in html format	December 2004
	Encourage use of listserv	Use Council agenda and Council auto-response to publicize	Done

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CITY MANAGER APPROVAL: _____
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ATTACHMENTS:

- Attachment A: Comments from *CityPages* Focus Group
- Attachment B: Discussion of Other Cities' Newsletters
- Attachment C: Ideas Expressed in Brainstorming Session