



Marketing and Communications Strategy 2018-2020

Introduction

Modern marketing and communications methods and practices have evolved rapidly in recent years, reflecting a radically different media landscape, embracing digital technologies together with their associated levels of personal, direct and fast-paced engagement, and prioritising customer insight.

Context

If methods and practices have evolved beyond the traditional single or primary specialisms which characterised marketing and communications services in the recent past, so too has the context in which those services are planned and delivered in a local government setting.

The establishment of new councils in 2015, with larger populations, increased powers, including the advent of community planning, and growing financial pressures have impacted the shape of marketing and communications activities. They have also influenced the corresponding skills-base required to deliver in a new environment and in newly structured organisations.

The new Mid Ulster District Council invested in the creation of a centralised marketing and communications service, with responsibility for the development and delivery of effective external and internal marketing and communications activity which support the Council's vision, values and strategic direction.

In the first term of the new Council, marketing and communications has established its core services and has sought to embed a planned and integrated approach to marketing and communications activity. It has also sought to adopt new ways of working both as a service itself and with its internal clients.

The service's core remit is defined, but diverse, including:

- brand management, including of the corporate visual identity and corporate messaging
- facility marketing
- campaign development and delivery
- public relations work which extends across every department and service
- media management
- digital channel development and management
- graphic design and
- extensive elected member (primarily Chair and Deputy Chair) support.

Planned activity, which considers positioning and messaging, products and offering, pricing, target markets, channels, tactics and evaluation, has helped to ensure that marketing and communications are better aligned and more consistent.

This has allowed the service to more easily demonstrate how it supports the Council's strategic priorities and contributes to their achievement at departmental and service level, particularly through campaign work.

However, while marketing and communications work to date has always had a strategic imperative, the 'golden thread' which links individual elements of activity to

paint the 'big picture' or tell the 'big story' has not always been present or clear. The sense, ethos and ambition of the corporate body which is Mid Ulster District Council is therefore less visible and coherent.

In terms of building trust with our citizens and stakeholders and thereby building and maintaining the Council's reputation, the marketing and communications service now needs to introduce a new dimension to its work which positions the Council itself as a corporate body with an agreed narrative - its 'big story' - at its core.

This new Marketing and Communications Strategy, therefore, sets out a potential, over-arching corporate narrative which seeks to encapsulate the Council's goals and ambitions in a meaningful way for all our stakeholders: in other words, to tell the story of where we are as an organisation and, crucially, where we are going, in a way which resonates with our citizens, our staff and our stakeholders.

It sets out the service's overall aim in this context, specifies its objectives, and also outlines how the marketing and communications service proposes to use a series of core narrative statements to tell our story through the development and delivery of cohesive and integrated marketing and communications plans.

Supporting Strategic Goals

'Strategic communications supports the delivery of organisational priorities, policies and services through planned communications activity and is strategic when it is completely consistent with mission, vision and values' ('Modern Public Sector Communications', Northern Ireland Public Sector Communications Forum).

Aim

The service aims:

'to contribute to building trust in Mid Ulster District Council, in its vision and values, among our residents and customers, partners and stakeholders, councillors and staff, through effective marketing and communications'.

Objectives

The service has two key objectives:

1. To present and support the delivery of the Council's vision, values and strategic priorities externally and internally.
2. To promote the adoption of, and to utilise, an evidence-based, customer-focussed approach to marketing and communications which demonstrates excellence and value for money.

Objective 1

To present and support the delivery of the Council's vision, values and strategic priorities externally and internally.

Positioning The Council: Towards A Corporate Narrative

Our vision is 'to be at the heart of our community'.

While the Council demonstrates that it is, in fact, at the heart of its community through every individual service, programme or initiative it delivers, there is no overarching consistent, corporate narrative which is used as a mechanism to capture its plans, achievements and ambitions.

Developing a corporate narrative requires us to consider the thread that connects our vision, values and strategic priorities, as expressed through our Corporate Plan (and via associated departmental strategies and plans), and through our Community Plan.

Themes in both these central strategic documents align, spanning the economy, infrastructure, the environment and health and well-being.

They are perhaps expressed most succinctly through the Community Plan's commitment to partnership working to create:

'a welcoming place where our people are content, healthy and safe; educated and skilled; where our economy is thriving; our environment and heritage are sustained; and where our public services excel'.

Every outcome in the Community Plan is predicated on an investment of time, effort and money in Mid Ulster.

If we believe we are *investing in Mid Ulster, the place and its people*, then we are doing so by:

- Investing to create a thriving economy
- Investing to grow healthy communities
- Investing to enhance our environment
- Investing in our people (internal focus).

These 4 statements have the potential to act as the framework in which marketing and communications activity takes place. However, any corporate narrative has to be realistic and believable. If it lacks authenticity, it will not resonate positively with either external or internal audiences and the trust which is so essential to building relationships – and building reputations – will be missing.

Corporate Narrative 1

Investing to create a thriving economy:

We are investing to create a strong, sustainable, diverse and more competitive economy.

Marketing and Communications will develop plans to demonstrate how the Council is investing in the local economy by focussing on the Council's commitment to:

- fund, whether directly or via leveraged funding, to stimulate business development and growth
- support the industry-led Mid Ulster Skills Forum, its action plan and outcomes
- position Mid Ulster as the centre of manufacturing excellence here
- be an active force driving the planning and delivery of major connectivity and infrastructure projects.

Corporate Narrative 2

Investing to grow healthy communities

We are helping to grow vibrant, active and healthy communities in Mid Ulster by investing in their well-being.

Marketing and Communications will support the Council and its partners' ambitions to enable our residents to live well and to age well by focussing on:

- the use of customer insight and industry trends to aid the development of customer-centric product portfolios across leisure and outdoor recreation
- the development of supporting leisure and outdoor recreation marketing strategies which help to meet the leisure, health and well-being needs of Mid Ulster
- harnessing the opportunities for partnership marketing, communication and engagement with our key health and well-being partners
- developing and delivering a capital projects campaign plan which showcases the Council's investment in new facilities and infrastructure in towns and villages for individual and community well-being.

Corporate Narrative 3

Investing to enhance our environment

We value our environment and will optimise the management of our waste, preserving, protecting and enhancing our natural and built heritage.

We aim to demonstrate how the Council values the environment by focussing on:

- the design, development and delivery of recycling and waste-related campaigns which effect positive behaviour change
- how the Council's new Local Development Plan balances social, economic and environmental interests.

Corporate Narrative 4

Investing in our people (internal focus)

We value our employees, recognise their professionalism and their contributions to achieving corporate goals, and encourage innovation and excellence.

We aim to demonstrate how the Council invests in its employees by focussing on:

- the design, development and delivery of an internal communications plan which prioritises staff engagement, encourages staff to 'live' the Council's values, demonstrates that the Council is now a unified organisation and promotes the benefits of working with Mid Ulster.

Objective 1
To present and support the delivery of the Council's vision, values and strategic priorities externally and internally.
How
Through the development, strategic application and positioning of clear and coherent corporate narratives, associated messaging and bespoke campaigns. Through the use of clear and consistent branding. By actively profiling Mid Ulster regionally to enhance the Council and District's reputation.
Actions
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Test and agree new corporate narrative statements internally and with stakeholders.2. Create a narrative implementation plan.3. Continue to develop and deliver bespoke marketing and communications plans and campaigns in support of strategic corporate objectives, including a new internal communications plan.4. Identify projects or initiatives with regional significance on an annual basis for focussed profiling work.5. Continue to embed branding best practice and monitor brand use.

Objective 2

To promote the adoption of, and to utilise, an evidence-based, customer-focussed approach to marketing and communications which demonstrates excellence and value for money.

In line with the Council's vision to be 'at the heart of our community' and its 'customer focus' value, knowing and understanding the needs of our audiences will be at the heart of marketing and communications work.

Our customers are wide and varied, ranging from our citizens as a whole, geographic groupings, special interest groupings and specific service and facility users to partner organisations and our internal audiences, including elected members and staff.

Strategic marketing and communication puts a very clear understanding of the audience at the heart of its work, whether that work relates to policy, service design and delivery, or the creation and implementation of awareness-raising and behaviour-changing campaigns.

In addition, the advent of Community Planning with the attendant requirement for statutory partners to work together to achieve a distinct set of outcomes on a region by region basis, creates a very specific stakeholder engagement requirement for local government. It also creates the opportunity for marketing and communication teams to work in partnership.

Partnership marketing and communication can be resource-efficient but perhaps more importantly, an approach which sees organisations share expertise, knowledge, creativity and best practice, can also be more effective in terms of reach and engagement to meet joint or aligned objectives.

Customer Insight

To truly understand an audience requires insight into who our audiences are, what they think, how they behave, what they need, and how we can best meet those needs.

This goes beyond merely gathering and presenting data, statistics and qualitative information. Information needs to be interpreted and transformed to generate insight.

Insight may not always appear at first glance to be customer-based, particularly when considering a strategic policy issue. However, given we are a public service organisation, whatever we do fundamentally affects people and so there will always be a human element to our insight work.

Creating an understanding of our customers is a continuous and multi-stranded process, encompassing the outcomes of research, consultation, engagement, evaluations and feedback.

Ultimately this understanding of our audiences and the generation of customer insight should help to inform decision-making across the organisation, and, by extension our marketing and communications activity.

Evaluation

If understanding our customers is indeed a continuous process, then review and evaluation are essential and key to the delivery of strategic marketing and communications work.

Evaluation should not, however, be confined to the end of a process, but be undertaken in 'real-time' to allow actions to be re-focussed or adapted on an on-going basis to improve short-term and longer-term outcomes.

Inclusive Communication

Allied closely to our customer focus is the principle of inclusive communication, recognising that while we are digitally-led and will prioritise, where appropriate, the use of digital channels, we will continue to embrace traditional marketing and communications channels which have a valid and valuable role in meeting our audiences' needs and preferences.

However, in doing so, we will embrace the 'omni-channel' concept, where every channel we use is seamlessly connected visually, verbally and virtually. This will ensure that whether we are working across our web site and social media sites, print, out of home or in direct marketing, our positioning and messaging is clear and consistent.

We will use our insight to:

- Identity audiences more clearly
- Be clear about our objectives for each audience segment: what are we trying to do? Change behaviour? Improve operational effectiveness? Explain a policy or programme?
- Better understand our customers' needs.
- Influence the design and delivery of services based on evidence
- Develop the right content for delivery via the most appropriate channels
- Identify potential marketing and communications partners and work collaboratively to achieve common aims.

We will use evaluation to:

- Inform the planning stage of our marketing and communications work and to link clearly to our objectives: what are we trying to do? What do we want the audience to think or do differently as a result of our activity and how can we measure it to best show the impact.
- Set the metrics at the beginning of a process to track our success, ensuring we use the right metrics for the right marketing and communication discipline
- Evaluate our work as it progresses in 'real time' to adapt our approach as required, effect continual improvement and identify areas for on-going improvement
- Demonstrate how we deliver against our marketing and communication objectives and, by extension, our organisational goals.

Objective 2
To promote the adoption of, and to utilise, an evidence-based, customer-focussed approach to marketing and communications which demonstrates excellence and value for money.
How
<p>By accessing existing and commissioned sources of insight and evaluation to inform our understanding and influence our future activity.</p> <p>Through planned delivery of activity, which is evaluated and monitored for impact.</p> <p>By using social media strategically, ensuring our social media activity is well-researched, well-planned, monitored and evaluated.</p> <p>By adopting industry best practice in evaluative techniques, selecting the appropriate metrics to manage, plan and deliver robust evaluation.</p> <p>Through the service's contribution to the corporate innovation and revenue-raising agenda.</p> <p>By ensuring our marketing and communications staff are trained and upskilled to meet the demands of a changing digital landscape.</p> <p>By building alliances with our stakeholders to identify common areas of work, common objectives, similar audiences and messages.</p>
Actions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Compile baseline of existing internal customer insight data sources and of relevant external research and evaluation sources. 2. Use baseline results to identify data insight gaps. 3. Develop proposals to invest in building our customer insight. 4. Create a meaningful evaluations framework, drawing on industry best practice. 5. Develop a medium-term 'digital by design' strategy for Mid Ulster. 6. Establish a Community Planning Communications' Group with responsibility for managing the implementation of the Community Planning Engagement and Communications Strategy.

Resources and Budget

The strategy will be delivered using existing resources and with the existing budget of the Marketing and Communications service.

Monitoring and Review

In line with best practice and the commitment to evidence-based principle operated by the service, the strategy will be subject to on-going monitoring to assess progress and impact.

Given the election of a new Council in May 2019, the development of a new coterminous Corporate Plan, and the fast-changing landscape in which the service operates, the strategy will be reviewed, amended and extended in 2020.