

Agenda item 3

For decision: Communication update, including a proposal to hold a conference

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Summary

The Marketing and Communications Strategy (see Appendix 1) that was adopted in April 2016 is used to direct the work of the Marketing and Communications Team. It identifies target audiences and actions.

This report provides an update on recent and planned work. It also answers the following questions: How are we doing? How usable are our websites? How skilled are we on social media & what are the pitfalls? Where could external and internal communications be improved? What can we learn from the private sector around PR?

The report also proposes to hold a conference in January / February aimed at raising the profile of the Town Hall as a conference venue and also to share with other councils some of the innovative projects FTC has been leading on.

How are we doing?

Communications on the face of it is an easy task, particularly at Frome Town Council. There is never a shortage of interesting and worthy projects to talk about. This council has an ambitious work programme and is a gift to a communications team. The first challenge is to be interesting and capturing a suitable tone whilst not being dull and boring. This is an ongoing challenge that we try to meet each time we issue a communication.

The second challenge comes in trying to be all things to all people. We have many different audiences for many different subjects. And we use as many different methods of communication to reach them. Our audiences include, residents, Cllrs (at all Councils), staff, the public sector, potential residents, visitors, potential visitors, existing businesses and potential businesses.

The communication tools that we have at our disposal include, informing and discussing at meetings, word of mouth, using notice boards, generating news items in the local press as well as buying space, emails, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

However, virtually all of our communications start from our websites and we then use the communication tools to disseminate it.

How useable are our websites?

The main channel for communicating to the public are the websites. These are the platforms where the council presents its very best self. The places where we have the most control over our message.

As such, both websites should be clean, bright, full of easily accessible and relevant data, up to date information about us, our town and the projects that we and our partners are pursuing.

FTC has two websites.

1. *Frome Town Council website (aka Frome Community website)*

The audience for the Frome Town Council website comprises mainly, but not exclusively, people in the town. It looks good following the recent reskin but has grown organically since it was launched and it is, in places, out of date and a little disorganised. It is in need of thorough purge. This will be done in the coming two-three months.

The amount of hits that Frome Town Council website receives have been relatively stable over the past 12 months at just over 100,000. The posts are largely well received and often people are directed to the website from social media. This channelling from social media to website helps to ensure that people know that the website is there when they need it.

We will be adding more images following the purge of old material and then will be restructuring the home page to improve the way it looks and its functionality.

2. *Discover Frome Website*

The Discover Frome website is primarily aimed at residents and visitors who are interested in what is going on in Frome. The Performing Arts Panel noted that there was lots going in the town but there was no cohesive approach to promote this and that Discover Frome could and should be that mechanism.

A review was carried out in advance of the Marketing Intern starting and identified that the Discover Frome website was – like the Frome Town Council website – in need of updating. The intern has been working on this website to bring it up to date. This includes updating accommodation, shopping, markets and events and has already paid dividends as the number of hits has increased

We are also updating the listings which will also inform the content of The Annual, a printed document published in partnership with The List and agreed at Town Matters recently. The Annual will be published in January 2017.

Once the content is correct the Discover Frome website will be reskinned. It will look similar in tone and shade to the Frome Town Council website but be more image based and have a focus on the visitor offer of arts, events, activity and history. There will also be seamless links between the two websites whilst retaining separate identities and URL's.

How skilled are we on social media & what are the pitfalls?

Social media referrals to our websites continue to do well and account for around 23% of FTC web traffic. They are slowly increasing our reach through likes/follows. However, it is not a viral phenomenon and there is room for improvement.

Facebook and Twitter traffic is steadily increasing, but the number of Instagram followers of our account has doubled to 500 in 4 weeks. This is encouraging as it shows that more people are engaged with our subject matter. Importantly, Instagram has also a different demographic to other social media profiles.

Unlike websites, social media is two way thing and there will always be those who criticise us. It is easier to use social media than to engage face to face. We always run the risk of critical posts gathering momentum so we continually monitor traffic. Our approach is to act swiftly and maintain clear and positive information streams.

The benefits of social media far outweigh the negatives. Using social media provides a platform that a council wouldn't normally have and it is an important element in the engagement matrix to ensure that residents have information and have their say.

Other improvements to external communications

Websites, emails and social media do not engage with everyone in the community. It is important that we continue to use other methods of communication too.

Public Council and committee meetings are a way to engage with and receive feedback from the community. But attendance at meetings varies and is rarely more than 25 people. To increase this number, we have a live streaming facility for those who would prefer to watch from home rather than attend in person. Live streaming has technically been quite challenging but we are getting better at it and once the process is smooth we will live stream alongside live Facebook and Twitter posts. The final stage will be to allow a two-way exchange via the feeds but we're not quite there yet.

Finally, using telephone calls, emails and issuing information that is placed on notice boards and via news releases continues and these methods remain a key way in which we communicate with the community.

Overall, we use a range of ways to communicate with our audiences. From Twitter posts, through emails to notice boards. We will never achieve perfection but we continue to refine our methods and keep in mind that we have different audiences who prefer to communicate in different ways.

Improvements to Internal Communication

Currently internal communications are based on meetings, conversations, emails, a shared server and calendars.

To assist with internal communications a relationship management system is being explored which will help to ensure that the Cllrs and staff are more aware of what is going on. This project is in a very early stage and updates will be forthcoming as it develops.

What can we learn about PR from the private sector?

The private sector rarely skimps on PR resources and constantly self-promotes. Inevitably, with more resources, we would have more success in reaching our audiences. We could explore, for example, promoting the town to new audiences further afield.

However, the Marketing & Communications team is already making a difference to the visibility of Frome Town Council and our work. Looking forward, getting the basics right, like our websites, email updates, further refining our understanding of our core audiences and live streaming are probably higher priorities.

Partnering with others is also a possibility. Jointly working with GWR and/or Visit Somerset are being investigated currently.

A conference

One way we could raise the profile of the town and the council is a conference and it is proposed that Frome Town Council holds one at the Town Hall in January/February. The conference would have a theme, 'Breaking the mould' and two aims: to showcase Frome Town Hall as a conference destination; and to highlight the innovative work of FTC.

This conference will share good practice through a series of workshops, discussion panels and learning opportunities. It would seek to showcase innovation of both this and other town councils. The conference would be cost neutral other than staff time. The recommendation is to stage a conference.

A Town Survey

There are two ways that we can check that we are improving: first we can establish on line metrics on the number of hits, likes and followers etc. This is useful but doesn't enable us to really understand what our audiences think.

The second way to check is via a town survey which would produce audience data on how effective the council is being, both in terms of reach as well as content. A survey could also serve to open new communication channels which can be used to inform all areas of the council's work. We could carry out the survey in-house using Omni-channel. Alternatively, we could commission a town survey from a research company.

Either way, a survey would need to be timely and well planned. At this stage, Cllrs should note this thought and further information will come back to a future meeting.

Conclusions

The arrival of the Marketing and Communications Assistant and the Tourism Intern has meant that FTC can now be more ambitious.

As described above, FTC is in a good place communication wise but we must continue to improve. Improving our websites is a core task and this is happening now. Using as many

means as possible to get our messages to our audiences is crucial. And we mustn't forget the traditional ones such as notice boards, public meetings and news releases to do this as well as more innovative ones such as the proposed conference. It is equally important that we check how we are doing and the upcoming proposal on the town survey will help us achieve this.

Recommendations

1. Note the progress on communications.
2. In consultation with Cllr Usher, delegate to the M&C Manager, to stage a cost neutral conference called 'Breaking the Mould' in January/February. This conference is to include interactive workshops, discussion panels and learning opportunities for FTC and other councils.