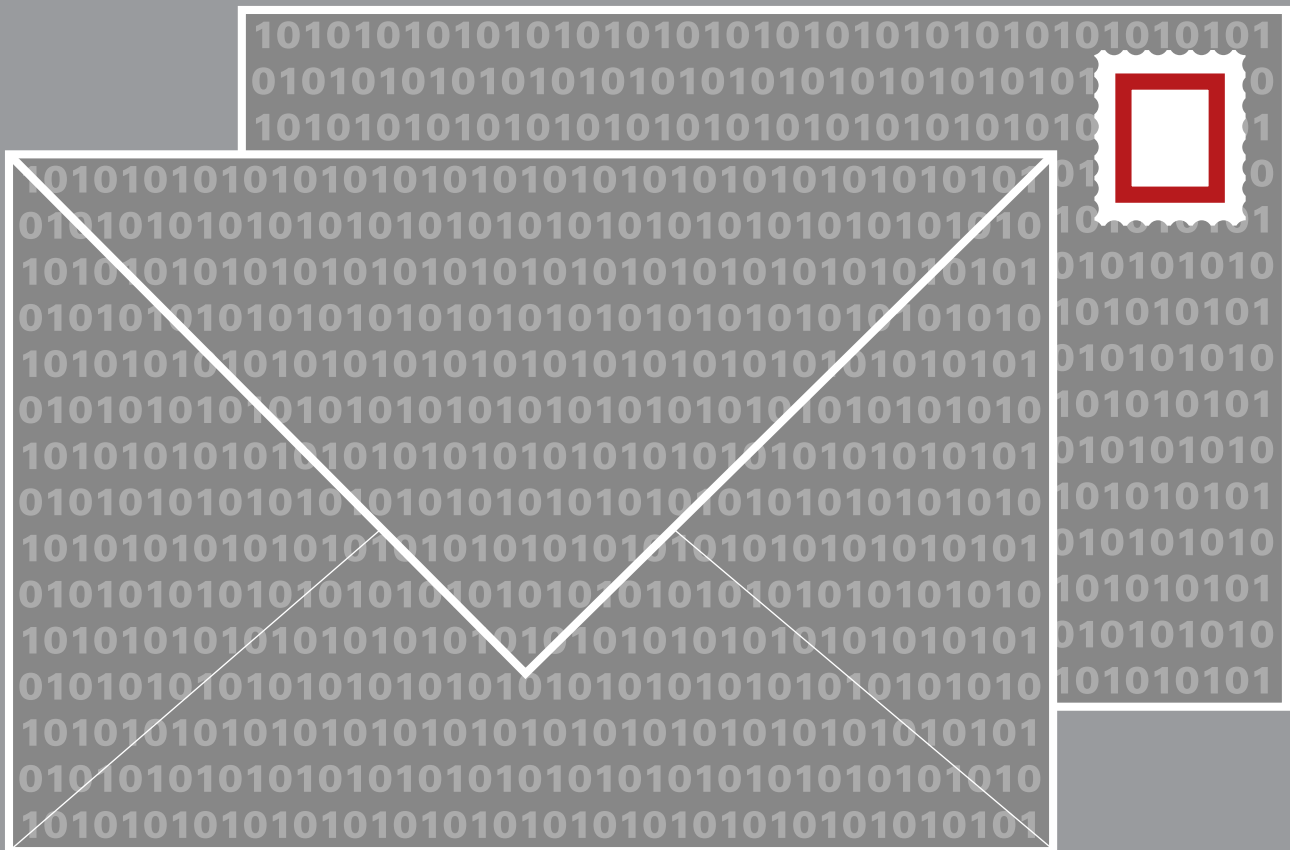


# Digital Communications in the Marketing Mix



## To request further reports

This report is based on research into webcasting within the local authority setting. Research was carried out by Xpedita and resulted in an in-depth report. This can be obtained, along with a short summary document, from the IDeA. A report for IT Directors was also produced and provides key technical information on broadcasting and receiving webcasts.

**To request a copy of the full or summary webcasting report or the IT report please either:**



**Complete the online form found at :**

**<http://www.idea.gov.uk/publications/webcasting>**



**Telephone the Helpdesk at IDeA on **020 7296 6880****

# Understanding the Communications Mix

Local authorities can mobilise tactics from television to council tax bill inserts to giant posters to websites in the service of a communications objective. But how can a communications manager know which one to use, and when? And how can they be sure they are getting best value for the taxpayers' money? Nowhere is this problem greater than with the new electronic forms of communication, with their huge range, potential, and pitfalls.

This report gives communications managers **an overview of how the various electronic tactics fit** in to the communications priorities for local government. Its centrepiece is a grid of tactics that suit different audiences and objectives, followed by a more in-depth description of the digital tactics and links to examples (both public-sector and commercial).

We have produced this guide **in response to strong views** amongst communications professionals that digital tactics must be integrated into an overall communications mix. But, we found, most councils were not sure where or how to integrate, or how to prioritise their limited funds and attention.

We recommend that each council has a strategy for each of the three core digital communications tactics: **websites, email, and search engine promotions**.

*'Don't look at electronic communication as a substitution of other forms. It's another tool in the communications mix.'*

Director of Communications, County Council

# Audiences and Communications Goals

Local government has five major audiences for its communications, including internal and external audiences. These are:

- Residents
- Media
- Partners
- Staff
- Members

And, in general, communications goals are one of the following three:

- **To provide ongoing information about council activities and services and to respond to queries**
- **To highlight specific council activities or services (ie, for campaigns)**
- **To solicit participation or opinions**

A single communications objective might involve several audiences and several goals.

*'[Digital tactics] are merely tools and we need to see them just as tools. I think what you need is a communications strategy that recognises what your key objectives, what your key messages are and then you decide which mix of tools are best suited to meet those objectives.'*

Head of Communications, County Council

*'It isn't a choice about whether you should, it's just the when and how really. Don't fight the tide – you've got to look for the opportunities where they are and try to get in ahead of the game.'*

Head of Communications, City Council

# A Strategic Approach to Digital Tactics

While there are many digital tactics that could be considered, councils should at the minimum have a strategy that includes the three core online tactics:

## Websites

Intranets, extranets, the council website and microsites. Websites have received the majority of council attention and for good reason – they are both flexible and reliable. The business case for websites is normally made in terms of service delivery as they make council services more convenient and accessible.

## Email

While email is being integrated into contact centres, few councils have taken advantage of the opportunity to provide information on a regular basis through email newsletters; nor to promote specific campaigns through email alerts, relying instead on more expensive paper news or magazines. Email newsletters and alerts can never replace paper, but will offer best value for audiences who are well connected to the Internet, since setting up a system for regular emailing should cost under £5000. As an added bonus, email opening and response rates can be easily measured.

## Search engine promotions and optimisation

Search engines are used by 88% of the Web population, and are their first port of call when searching for information. Councils should take advantage of their cost-per-click advertising for campaigns and ensure that they come top of the list for essential service terms. Cost-per-click campaigns are extremely efficient, and a basic search engine optimisation campaign can cost as little as £500, making substantial cost savings over traditional advertising.

Tactical tip:

*'Ensure that the plan is developed in bite size chunks to really develop confidence in what you're doing both in terms of those providing it and those on the receiving end. Have some success early on and build up the confidence in the usage – don't try to go for the big bang.'*

Assistant Chief Executive, County Council

# Guide to Digital Communications Tactics in the Communications Mix

	Residents		Media	
	Traditional	Online	Traditional	Online
Awareness	Posters Television, radio, or newspaper advertising Tax bill inserts	Search engine advertising & other web promotions Alerts (Email, SMS, council web site) Microsites	Press releases Face-to-face meetings and interviews	Alerts (Email & SMS)
Information	Council newspaper or magazine Tax bill inserts Coverage in local, regional and national media Public records One-stop shops Contact centres	Council website Email newsletter Email responses Recorded webcasts Video kiosk	Direct telephone contacts Ongoing briefings Face-to-face meetings Press briefing sessions	Regular email briefing Electronic press kit on council website Webcasts Email responses
Participation	Open meetings Consultation process	Live webcasts of meetings Interactive chat & discussion forums Blogs Email response by councillors etc.		

We have produced the following grid as a guide to help communications managers identify potential tactics to use with different audiences and communications objectives. In each cell of the grid, the top portion identifies traditional off-line tactics, and the bottom cell identifies on-line tactics. Digital tactics are defined on the pages following the grid. In each cell of the grid, the **left hand** portion identifies traditional off-line tactics and the **right hand** cell identifies online tactics. Online tactics are defined on the pages following the grid.

Partners		Staff		Members	
Traditional	Online	Traditional	Online	Traditional	Online
Direct telephone contacts  Face-to-face meetings	Alerts (SMS, email, extranets)	Staff briefings	Alerts (Email, SMS and Intranet)	In-person briefings	Alerts (Email, SMS)
Direct telephone contacts  Ongoing briefings  Face-to-face meetings	Extranet website  Email newsletter  Webcasts  Video-conferencing  Interactive chat & discussion forums	Staff magazine  Staff meetings	Intranet website  Email newsletter  Email responses  Webcasts  Interactive chat & discussion forums	Briefing papers  Face-to-face	Email briefings  Video-conferencing  Interactive chat

# Communications Objectives

Each communication objective has corresponding communication tactics, both online and offline, that is, tactics for awareness, tactics for information, and tactics for participation.



## Awareness

**Objective:** to make the target audience aware of a particular message or resource.



## Information

**Objective:** to inform the target audience in more depth about a particular subject.



## Participation

**Objective:** to encourage democracy at a local level and to enable the council to listen to as well as to speak to the target audience.

*'Look at any forms of electronic communications from the user's point of view first and not from the deliverer's point of view.'*

Head of Communications, County Council



## Digital Tactics – Awareness

### Search engine advertising and web promotions

Web advertising takes many forms, including purchasing banners on relevant online publications, purchasing 'sponsored links' on search engines or purchasing text ads on relevant email newsletters. Many forms of advertising are now on a 'cost-per-click' basis ensuring guaranteed return on expenditure. Example: the American charity Family Violence Prevention Fund has purchased a sponsored result on the search 'domestic violence' on Google.

### Search engine optimisation

A promotional technique ensuring that relevant web pages will be returned close to the top of search engine results by optimising web page titles, text, keywords and links. Search engine optimisation has a minimal cost but takes several months before it is effective.

Example: searching for 'Derbyshire' on Google shows the county council as the first result.

### Alerts

For registered users who have expressed an interest, unscheduled 'alerts' can be flashed to email or SMS (mobile phone text). Citizens of Malta, for example, can register to receive SMS notifications of court sitting/hearing deferrals, licence-renewal, exam results, and direct credit payments from the Department of Social Security. See more at <http://www.egov4dev.org/mgovapplic.htm>. Alerts are normally extremely inexpensive once contact details have been gathered, and would work well with staff, partners, or media contacts.

### Microsite

A microsite is a small site often associated with an advertising campaign. It is often just a few pages long, and the look and feel of the site echo the look and feel of the advertising. Microsites are designed to be quick to implement and therefore flexible. Often they are not intended to be permanent. For example, Unison has created a 'Pay Commission' microsite for its members working in local government who are interested in this issue:

<http://www.unison.org.uk/localgov/paycommission/index.asp>



# Digital Tactics – Information

## Websites

Web pages can be primarily focused on the transmission of information. This is the most common type of web site. Example: [www.camden.gov.uk](http://www.camden.gov.uk). They can also be focused on delivering services or other transactions online. Example: Council tax payment online at [www.birmingham.gov.uk](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk).

## Email newsletters

Regular, periodic emails to subscribers are widely used in the business world to communicate with customers (for an example, see [http://www.lastminute.com/lmn/webcourier/en\\_GB/preview/index.html](http://www.lastminute.com/lmn/webcourier/en_GB/preview/index.html)). Email newsletters can vary in price from quite inexpensive to more expensive, depending on the amount of graphics, customisation, and number of registered users. They are, however, more inexpensive than print, in general, and far more measurable in terms of knowing how many people read or respond. Kingston-upon-Thames council has a monthly newsletter for residents at: [http://www.kingston.gov.uk/newsletter\\_information.htm](http://www.kingston.gov.uk/newsletter_information.htm)

## Webcasts

These can be both video and audio, both live and pre-recorded. Cost tends to vary with production quality but these can be very cost-effective for training and, used well, they can strengthen engagement with local democracy. The IDeA has produced a recent large-scale report on webcasts at: <http://www.idea.gov.uk/publications/webcasting>

## Videoconferencing and kiosks

Several councils are using video kiosks, or public information points, to enable a virtual 'one-stop shop'. Information is accessed via touch-screen menus and residents can talk face-to-face with council representatives. While expensive, kiosks are more effective for some rural residents than other forms of communication. Web videoconferencing can also be used for one-on-one communications with important audiences such as partners, staff, and members. One example is in the East Riding of Yorkshire, where they are called 'citizen links.' <http://www.eastriding.gov.uk/council/citizenlink.html>



## Digital Tactics – Participation

Some citizens prefer to communicate via email, and councils are increasingly using this medium both to solicit views and to reply to queries, as it is both convenient and environmentally-friendly. Council contact centres and help desks can be email-enabled, and responses to common questions can be automated. Email response, where possible, is typically more cost-effective than a similar telephone communication, and can also be used in conjunction with telephone requests to deliver detailed information, forms, etc. More and more councils are incorporating email as a matter of course, see for example Redbridge Council: <http://www.redbridge.gov.uk/services/index.cfm/157/Show>.

### Interactive chats and discussion forums

Live text chat can add a powerful participatory dimension to a webcast or other online event, such as an important council speech. CNN uses interactive chat services to allow members of the audience to interview guests on topical issues, for example:

<http://www.cnn.com/COMMUNITY/transcripts/2001/01/16/halliday/>.

Discussion forums, where contributions remain online for others to view, are more widely used; for an example see

<http://www.cumbriacc.gov.uk/forum/>.

However, discussion forums and chats need both publicity and participation on the part of council moderators to be successful, which means they are long-term strategies that will require ongoing investment.

### Blogs

A blog – short for ‘weblog’ – is an online journal typically published by a single individual. Members of the public can comment on each entry. A growing number of councillors are using these to communicate directly with the public – see <http://jamesmills.blogspot.com/> for the blog of Cllr James Mills of West Oxfordshire District Council. More information on blogging is available from the IDeA at:

<http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/80256d350027aaca/httppublicpages/cdfb308677a395f980256e51005d7390?opendocument>

Blogs are inexpensive but require a considerable investment of time on the part of the blogger.

# Integrating traditional and online tactics

## Case Study: Derbyshire County Council

This scheme is notable both for its success and for the way that electronic tactics were integrated as secondary tactics into an overall communications scheme. The business plan was built on the projected increase in public transport, but Derbyshire has used the scheme to test a range of electronic tactics and in the process has built a lasting channel with youth.

### Background

The Derbyshire MORI opinion survey of 1999/2000 revealed low awareness and a poor reputation of council services amongst young consumers. Teenagers did not see county council services as relevant to their day-to-day lives.

### Objectives

- To enhance the reputation of the county council and improve understanding of its role and services amongst young people.
- To increase use of public transport and uptake of key council services by a cross-cutting approach to the promotion of young people's services.
- To create an innovative, integrated channel of communication between the county council and teenagers.

### Description

The 'big idea' was to launch a strongly branded, benefit-rich student card, built around the council's existing young person's concessionary travel card.

The new card would offer show-and-go deals in top-name high street shops and restaurants in addition to council-funded half price bus and rail fares, free internet access at libraries and discounts at sports centres.

The b\_line campaign uses a broad mix: press and radio advertising, leaflets and magazines, promotions in school, a website, point-of-sale material, direct mail, mass e-mail and merchandising.

A b\_line mobile phone text-message 'soap opera' to young people generated national media attention. Almost 4,000 young people have signed up for regular mobile phone or email alerts from the county council.

In February 2003 voting for the Derbyshire Youth Forum was held through b\_line, using internet, text and ballot forms. Over 5,000 votes were cast in 'The b\_line Big Vote', compared to 250 the previous year and the campaign was endorsed by pop idols Darius, Sarah Whatmore and Duncan James of Blue. The 2004 b\_line Big Vote drew over 15,000 votes.

## Results

By July 2003 over 90% of 11–18 year olds in Derbyshire carry a b\_line card (54,000). Only 28% of eligible young people applied for the earlier travel card.

b\_line has resulted in significant increases in the use of county council services by young people. In 2003, bus travel by b\_liners increased by 179%. County council libraries have reported significant increases in young people joining the library – as much as a 200% rise in some areas. Trading standards have also reported an increase in the number of young people using their consumer helplines.

The latest Derbyshire MORI poll in December 2002 showed high awareness of the b\_line scheme amongst the community. b\_line was the fifth highest-rated county council service in terms of resident satisfaction. Of the 28 services surveyed by the poll, b\_line is by far the lowest-spending.

The dedicated b\_line website averages 22,500 page visits each month, and is one of the top three areas of the county council website.

b\_line was cited several times in the Audit Commission report in January 2003 which rated Derbyshire County Council as an 'excellent' authority, one of only 22 councils to achieve this in the country.

A new dialogue has been created with young people. In the period July 2002–July 2003 5,200 emails have been sent to the county council by young people, of which 96% are positive or neutral (seeking information, giving ideas, entering competitions).

## Budget

£150,000 initially and £150,000 per year ongoing. Most of the budget initially went to actually issuing the first cards; and the ongoing budget is primarily devoted to the print magazine.

# Contact Information

**This report was compiled by Xpedita Limited for the Improvement and Development Agency.**

**For further information about this report, please contact either the IDeA or Xpedita.**

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## **About IDeA**

The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) was established by and for local government in April 1999 and works to help all councils improve so that they match the standards of the best.

## **About Xpedita**

Xpedita is a technology communications company that specialises in putting together communications that include the best of both old and new technology.

## **Acknowledgements**

In preparing this report, we spoke to a range of directors and heads of communication at councils who were noted for their overall excellent performance in communication, as determined by a review of Best Value reports, MORI surveys, and awards from local government bodies and industry bodies. We would like to thank the interview participants for their time and participation.

