Communication Problem and Background Information

In a recent citizen survey, 40% of respondents rated Labrador City’s communication with citizens as “less than average.” This perception was unacceptable to the city council, so they developed a strategic communications plan to increase the city council’s communication of issues and actions with the city’s residents.

The communication plan hinged on creating an e-mail distribution list and renovating the city’s website to include information such as:

- A schedule of city council meetings,
- Postings of recent city council actions,
- Information reports on current and emerging city issues,
- A discussion board for interaction between citizens, city management and elected officials, and
- A library of video-recorded city council meetings.

The city council elected to develop these improvements after studying several civic journalism projects that have previously been developed to encourage citizen participation in government issues. Namely, the “New Hampshire Tax Challenge” project and the “Redistricting Game” project used electronic communication to accomplish their communications goals. The council also considered additional civic journalism research that shows a trend towards cynicism about government and a growing feeling of alienation from government. A recent study by ICMA (International City/County Managers Association) found that most citizens perceive “government operations as complicated and overwhelming.” Additionally, research has shown that citizens often do not know how to enter the system in order to be more active in their local government. For all of these reasons, the Labrador City Council wants to address communication issues and provide a more comprehensive communications program to educate and include all citizens in their local government.

Description of Study

This report will describe a new study commissioned by the Labrador City Council to evaluate the effectiveness of the new communications program.

The research question asked in this project is:
After a targeted communications plan is executed, will citizens agree that the city council communicates issues and actions well with citizens, when good communication is defined as concise, timely and understandable and communication is defined as any medium in which citizens learn of city council issues and actions?

The hypothesis is:
When a random-sample survey is conducted and key terms are defined, 80% of citizens will agree that the city council communicates issues and actions well with citizens.

A qualitative research method has been chosen for this research, specifically, a random-sample survey will be used. The survey will be mailed to a random sample of citizens, determined by using a random number chart, with the number being the customer’s utility number (all citizens have public utilities and are assigned a customer number.) The population of Labrador City is 10,000 (N=10,000). Desiring a confidence limit of approximately five percent, the chosen sample size is 300 (n=300). An extra 50 participants will be included to adjust for non-responses. To conduct this survey, 350 customer numbers will be randomly drawn. The customer’s name, address and telephone number will be recorded.

Measuring Instrument
The new survey will be one page, front and back, in length (see Exhibit A). Participants will be asked to respond to seven statements. Five statements will require the respondent to mark their preference using a Likert scale with choices described as values 1 through 5. Two of the statements are designed to measure awareness of specific city communication products and will require only a yes or no answer. The scale will be defined as: 1= strongly disagree; 2= disagree; 3= not sure of agreement/disagreement; 4= agree; 5= strongly agree. Another factor of NA will be included for the response of “I do not have enough information to form an opinion.”

The statements will be:
- The city council communicates their actions well with citizens;
- The city council communicates current issues well with citizens;
- The city council’s communication with citizens is concise;
- The city council’s communication with citizens is timely;
- The city council's communication with citizens is understandable;
- I am aware of the city council's e-mail distribution list (yes or no);
- I am aware of the city council's web page (yes or no).

The instructions at the top of the page define "good" communication as concise, timely and understandable. Further, "communication" will be defined as all mediums in which citizens learn of city council issues and actions, including but not limited to articles on the city council website, newspaper articles, attending/viewing city council meetings, e-mail from or on behalf of the city council and personal communication with elected officials (mayor and city councilors). Note that while seven statements will be evaluated, only statements one and two will be used to confirm or refute the hypothesis. Statements three through seven are being gathered for future research and will not be considered to test the hypothesis of this research.

A cover letter (Exhibit B) will accompany the survey and will explain why the survey is being conducted, how the participants were chosen, the expected amount of time required to complete the survey and the requested return date. The letter will further encourage the selected participant to complete the survey as truthfully as possible. The letter will explore the citizen to complete the survey, communicating that completion of this research is vital to improving Labrador City and will appeal to the citizen’s sense of civic responsibility. If each survey is not received by the requested return date, a follow-up postcard (Exhibit C) will be mailed. If no response is received after that, a reminder phone call will be made. Follow-up phone calls will continue until the desired number of completed surveys is received. Whenever 306 completed surveys are received, additional efforts to gather more surveys will be halted.

Data Collection

Respondents will mail completed surveys to Town Hall in a postage-paid reply envelope. The completed surveys will be collected by office staff and held for the researcher’s review. Once the completed survey is received by the researcher, the participant’s positive response (positive meaning only that the survey has been received and is complete) will be recorded on a survey log (Exhibit D) and the responses to the survey will be entered into the data spreadsheet (Exhibit E).

Every effort has been taken to ensure that surveys were not mailed to former citizens who have moved from Labrador City. The cover letter addresses the proper action for selected participants who have moved from the city. If surveys are received from non-
citizens, the positive response to the survey will be included in the survey log but no responses will be entered into the data spreadsheet. Other partial or incorrect responses will not be entered into the data spreadsheet.

Participants were asked to circle the number between one and five corresponding to their agreement with certain statements. Participants were not given the option to create a half-number (such as 4.5) to describe their agreement or disagreement. However, if any respondents include a half number, that number will be rounded up to the nearest whole number.

**Target Audience and Variables**

This survey is intended to measure citizen perception of quality communication with the city council. All citizens of a responsible age are eligible to participate in this survey. No pre-qualification of respondents is required, other than determining that all respondents are over 18 years of age and are current residents of Labrador City.

Several variables exist in this research. To summarize, variables are:

- Respondent's electronic communication access and proficiency
- Timely and accurate distribution of survey
- Respondent's general opinion of government
- Respondent's understanding of survey directions and definitions
- Respondent's ability to differentiate between effective communication and communication of good news
- Respondent's time and thought commitment to survey responses

**Data Analysis**

The data will be analyzed on a response data spreadsheet. The response to each question will be logged onto the spreadsheet. The spreadsheet has been formatted to automatically add the number of responses to each statement (see Exhibit E for specific information.) As stated earlier, 350 random-sample surveys will be mailed. If the survey is not completed within 10 days, a follow-up postcard will be mailed. If still no response, follow-up phone calls will be made indefinitely. After 300 completed surveys are received, no additional effort will be made to gather the remaining surveys. All surveys received after the target number of 300 has been received will be disregarded. After 300 surveys are received, the researcher will finalize the data to determine if the hypothesis has been proven. The
hypothesis will be proven when 240 responses to statements one and two are logged as "agree" or "strongly agree."