Labrador City (population 10,000) recently distributed a survey to all citizens. Citizens were instructed to anonymously complete the survey, rating all city services. The survey was four pages in length and required the respondent to mail it, at the respondent’s expense, or return it to city hall. The survey used a Likert-style scale for citizens to rate city services, including communication. Forty percent of the respondents rated the city's communication with citizens as “average” and 40% rated communication as “less than average.”

Prior to seeing the results of the survey, the city council believed that the city's communication with citizens was adequate. After seeing the compiled results of the survey, the council commissioned a plan to improve communication. The plan involved a two-tiered approach to increase the city council’s communication of recent council actions and issues to citizens. First, the Town implemented an e-mail distribution list. The list is used to announce upcoming city council meetings and to communicate city council actions after each meeting. The distribution list was compiled from existing citizen and stakeholder e-mail addresses that the city currently had recorded. The second part of the plan, grouped together as “website renovations”, created a city council web page that contains the following information: a schedule of city council meetings; postings of recent council actions; information reports on current and emerging city issues, written by city department heads and elected officials; a discussion board (web log) for city council, city management and citizens to interact on current issues; and a library of video-recorded city council meetings. Also, the city council webpage will include information about the e-mail distribution list and an invitation to join the list.

The council directed citizens to the new web page via the city’s existing website, newspaper advertisements, a billboard on the major highway leading into and out of the city, in the quarterly citizen newsletter and with a statement printed on utility bills. All messages sent to the e-mail distribution list contain a link to the site.

Research Question, Hypothesis and Variables

The research question for 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:

After the new communications plan is executed and advertised, 80% of citizens who are provided with clear definitions [of “good communication” and “communication”] will agree that the city council communicates issues and actions well with citizens.

Several variables exist in this research. First, computer ownership, Internet access and comfort with electronic communication will determine whether or not citizens will participate in the new communications tools. A positive survey evaluation is dependent on citizens' comfort with electronic communication. Regarding the actual distribution of the survey, speed and accuracy of mail delivery and accuracy of the utility mailing list will determine if and when the selected participants will receive the survey. Citizens’ general opinion of local government will determine if they choose to complete the survey. Also, the participant’s opinion of government in general will determine not only participation but chosen responses. For example, the city council periodically responds to groups advocating for smaller and less-expensive government in general, from the federal level to the municipal level. Respondents from this group will likely believe that any government spending is wasteful and should be eliminated. An additional variable is the citizen’s level of understanding and perspective on the definitions provided in the survey. For example, the city council is measuring citizens' opinion on effective communication, not on positive communication. This survey is dependent on the respondent being able to differentiate between effective communication, defined as timely, concise and understandable, and positive communication, possibly defined as an increase in services with a lowered tax rate. Often times, the city council must communicate negative information, such as a tax rate increase. Although the information communicated may not be well-received by the population, it should nonetheless be communicated effectively.

**Outcomes Expected**

First, consideration of the city’s demographics is relevant to the communications and advertising strategy. Labrador City is a suburb of the state’s capital. Census data indicate that the median age is 35, that 75% of the city’s residents hold college degrees and that 80% of the population have professional jobs. Eighty-five percent of city residents have a computer in their home. Of the citizens who have Internet access, 60% have high-speed service and 40% have dial-up service (relevant when using certain web applications, such as viewing video). High-speed Internet service is
available at no cost in the city’s library. The state highway department has reported that each day 30,000 vehicles travel on the main highway leading into and out of the city. Most of the city’s residents travel that highway on their way to work. Billboards placed along the highway are very visible in that much of the trip is spent traveling at a low rate of speed due to traffic.

It is expected that the majority of the city residents will see the highway billboard and will visit the new web page. Labrador City residents have defined themselves previously as very comfortable with technology and have shown preferences for electronic communication. The popularity of the e-mail distribution list is not known, as many of the residents may be adverse to receive additional e-mail, considering that all update topics may not be seen as interesting or relevant to their situation.

The expected answer to the research question 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. The response rate is expected to be 85.7%.

**Research Method and Survey Design**

A qualitative research method has been chosen for this project. Specifically, a random-sample survey will be used. A random-sample survey was chosen for several reasons. First, the researcher has concluded that the original survey distributed to citizens was flawed in several ways. The survey was mailed with a quarterly citizen newsletter and did not contain a cover letter or an introduction urging citizens to complete the survey. Citizens were not told why the survey was needed or how the results would be used. The survey was anonymous, so no tracking could be used to follow up on completion of the survey. Another problem was that postage was not paid on the survey and the design required the respondent to tape the survey closed, fold it and apply postage or return it to city hall. Additionally, the previous survey was written and edited by the same person, a manager untrained in research methods. Further, a Likert-type scale was used for rating of city services, yet no definitions were given. The new communications campaign was conducted in response to low ratings in the category, “city communication with citizens,” yet the type of communication was not defined. Without specifically defining what type of city communication should be rated, all types of city communication could have been considered. Citizens were left to decide on their own if they were judging an employee’s or a city councilor’s personal communication skills, written communication on a police report, the city newsletter or their monthly utility bill. The city council chose to focus on citizen communication of city council actions and decisions as the communication issue needing improvement. Although the survey was severely flawed, the council chose to address the negative responses and attempt to provide better
communication with citizens. Notwithstanding the prior survey’s incorrect methodology, the
council chose to use the same method (survey with Likert-style rating) for the follow-up survey, to
aid in consistency and for better comparison.

The second reason for choosing a random-sample survey is that the council desires to
determine how the general population rates city council communication. The council has mentioned
that many of the previous survey respondents may have had a specific issue or problem with city
services, which is why they would voluntarily complete a four-page survey with little prodding. Of
course, this theory is anecdotal in nature and may not have any validity. However, the council does
want to solicit opinions from random citizens to determine a true measure of general service
perceptions. Further, the researcher has shared a quotation from a research methods text book,
“Random sampling yields samples that are representative of the population from which they are
drawn,” (---, pg #) which has solidified the council’s decision on the validity of random sample
surveying.

While this survey will use a Likert scale similar to the previous survey, this survey will define
the terms and specify the kind of communication being studied, which is communication of city
council action and issues. 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 bill (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 5%, 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.

The new survey will be one page in length. Participants will be asked to mark their
preference on seven statements, using a Likert scale from 1-5. The scale will be defined as: 1=
strongly disagree; 2= disagree; 3= undecided; 4= agree; 5= strongly agree. Another factor of 0 will
be included for the response of “don’t know/don’t care.” The statements will be: 1) The city council
communicates their actions well with citizens; 2) The city council communicates current issues well
with citizens; 3) The city council’s communication with citizens is concise; 4) The city council’s
communication with citizens is timely; 5) The city council’s communication with citizens is
understandable; 6) I am aware of the city council’s e-mail distribution list; 7) I am aware of the city
council’s web page. The instructions at the top of the page will 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 will accompany the survey and will explain why the survey is being
carried out, 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 implore 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 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 are received. Whenever 300 completed surveys are received, additional efforts to gather
more surveys will be halted.

As completed surveys are received, the researcher will enter the responses into a spreadsheet.
Each of the seven questions will have a different spreadsheet. Each response will be entered in a
different cell. The hypothesis will be proven when 240 respondents select 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly
agree) to statements 1 and 2.