

Effective Customer Communications

Formed by Proving Services in 2014 and hosted at Cranfield University, the Future Highways Research Club is driven by the national challenges of austerity and increasing public dissatisfaction with the condition of highways assets and network performance. The purpose of the research is to explore radical and innovative approaches to highways services design and delivery. Founded on the principles of *participatory action-based research*, the focus of the research activity is determined by the county-scale membership, but typically excludes incremental economy and efficiency improvements and soft-tuning initiatives.

A high-priority area for exploration by the Future Highways Research Club (FRHC) has been the role of effective communications in managing the expectations of local authority stakeholders and the public; especially where the effects of budget cuts are reflected in the condition of the asset. The research established that customer satisfaction was higher where the public felt informed about the impact of austerity on highways maintenance priorities and became sympathetic to the challenges faced by the authority. An improved relationship between the authority and the public provides the necessary breathing room to enable highway maintenance teams to implement new service standards and significant changes to services delivery models – whilst benefiting from public support.

Having confirmed this principle, the FHRC assessed a wide range of highways services communications functions. Here we found that the approaches to communications varied considerably across authorities. Some organisations saw communications as a minor function or as a remotely-managed, enterprise-level service. Others saw social media as the long-awaited panacea for low-cost community engagement. Unsurprisingly, neither were proven to be especially effective at *identifying, reaching, informing or learning*; all essential elements for setting and managing customer expectations and improving customer satisfaction.

The research revealed that many of the prerequisite questions for establishing effective community communications were unanswered:

- What are we trying to achieve through effective communications?
- How do we segment the market for the purposes of effective targeting?
- What is the most effective (and affordable) marketing mix?

Communications: What are we trying to achieve?



In many cases the sprint to adopt social media (Twitter and Facebook) has bypassed these important questions and predetermined the marketing mix. The result for one authority was a communications programme that was noticed by just 0.04% of the network-using public. However, by implementing a social media team, the cost-to-serve for this tiny minority was vastly disproportionate to any benefit the authority was likely to receive.

In contrast with this approach, another authority contributed a weekly column in the local paper. With local paper readership in decline during the past decade, this approach may seem old-fashioned, but the results were surprising good. Although reaching only a relatively small number of readers, this segment was found to be particularly engaged and politically active. While other segments were poorly served, this low-cost approach to community engagement proved remarkably effective in reducing the complaints received by members.

Neither of these examples was, by the standards of modern marketing techniques, especially effective. To achieve the communications objectives of most highways authorities a balanced portfolio of communications methods (or marketing mix) is required.

To accomplish the most cost-effective marketing mix and the best outcomes for customer satisfaction, the FHRC considered a wide range of methods; from traditional road-side notifications to the newly-emerging methods, including community-based mapping and navigation applications (Google Maps, Here Maps and Waze).

	Website	Social Media	Contact Centre	Navigation App	Mobile App	Newsletter*	Regional TV & Radio	Local Press	Roadside Notification	Roadside Survey	Telephone Survey	Posters
Direction	↕	↕	↕	↕	↕	→	→	→	→	↕	↕	→
Immediacy	H	H	H	H	H	L	M	L	M	M	M	L
Reach	L	L	L	M	L	H	M	M	L	L	L	M
Control	H	L	H	L	H	H	M	M	H	H	H	H
Service Overhead	L	M	H	L	M	L	L	L	L	M	M	L
Cost	L	M	H	L	M	H	L	L	M	M	M	L
Awareness & Intelligence Gathering	H	M	H	L	?	-	-	-	-	M	M	-
Brand Marketing	L	L	-	-	?	H	L	M	L	L	L	M
Policy & Strategy Dissemination	H	L	-	-	?	H	-	H	-	L	L	M
Notifications & Announcements	-	L	-	H	?	M	L	L	L	M	M	L

Through the FHRC, Proving has developed instruments for assessing the efficacy of current communications methods and to assist in planning optimised communications functions and effective communications programmes. These tools will be freely available to research club members and are also available to all other authorities.

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