Public Information in Challenging Times: Planning a Path through the Forest

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The path of sound credence is through the thick forest of skepticism.

—George Jean Nathan

Public relations has a bad reputation, conjuring up words such as spin doctors, flacks, and other unflattering terms. Writer Alan Harrington said, “Public relations specialists make flower arrangements of the facts, placing them so that the wilted and less attractive petals are hidden by sturdy blooms” (Auletta 2007).

The profession continues to have its critics, with some even questioning whether it can be called a profession. However, there is no disputing that companies, organizations, public officials, and the public benefit from clear communication offered in an organized, strategic way. This is increasingly true as social media outlets flourish (Twitter, anyone?) and news is delivered in a steady stream. After a public information presentation a few years ago, one assessor brushed his hands together dismissively and said, “I don’t tell nobody nothin’.” His approach won’t work well when information on real estate sales is at everyone’s fingertips. If the assessor doesn’t help property owners understand how the value is determined according to local assessment laws, someone else will step in to intentionally or unintentionally misinform, mislead, or confuse.

Property owners expect access to information, and this can serve the responsible assessor well when a homeowner sees that similar properties are treated in a similar way. However, no one knows better than a property assessor how complicated and difficult to explain this business can be. What happens when the most recent date of value is 2009 and property values decline 30 percent? With such a complex topic, sending out a few press releases will not help decrease the number of appeals, reduce the number of phone calls to the office, or improve general satisfaction with assessment office performance.

One thing that doesn’t change in the face of developing technologies and new political administrations is the value of strategic planning. Even displaying the latest spatial and mapping imagery will not be effective if the assessment office is not clear in its message and what it is trying to accomplish.

Fayette County, Pennsylvania: A Public Information Case Study

In August 2000, concluding that the county’s base year 1958 assessment system could not withstand a legal challenge, the Fayette County Board of Commissioners contracted with a private company (Tyler Technologies) for a scratch revaluation project. In fact, seven major commercial property owners had appealed to the Court of Common Pleas to have their property assessments reduced. A successful appeal on behalf of these multimillion-dollar properties would have had severe effects on municipal and school budgets.

An in-house attempt at reassessment in 1985 was suspended by an earlier Board of Commissioners because of pressure from concerned citizens’ groups and the media. It is generally believed that the project took too long and was not communicated adequately to the public. According to newspaper accounts, the failed reassessment began in 1971 and was then turned over to the Fayette Engineering Company (not an appraisal firm) from 1977 to 1983.
During the 42-year time span between the original base year (1958) and a successful reassessment (2001), various chief assessors implemented new rate books or methods of valuation.

**Challenges**

In addition to suspicion and cynicism related to the failed reassessment attempt of the 1970s and 1980s, several other public attitudes and political actions created communication challenges during the 2000 revaluation.

**Tax Increases.** The Board of Commissioners raised county taxes 40 percent in a two-year period, 2000–2001. School boards also had a reputation for regular tax increases and were especially suspect because they were not subject to a cap on millage increases. Many property owners voiced the belief that the revaluation was simply another way of increasing taxes.

**Ratio Change.** In 2000 the commissioners voted to change the assessment ratio from 35 to 100 percent, effective in tax year 2001. By changing the ratio, the commissioners made permanent a temporary millage increase that had been court-approved in the previous year, locking in a 20 percent tax hike. This increase was in addition to the debt service on an $11-million bond issue. Since a ratio change is techni-
cally a reassessment, many property owners confused this change with the county’s revaluation project.

**Political Challengers.** A local politician and advocate for property tax reform and assessment fairness was a prominent voice in criticizing the county’s assessment system. This politician took several steps during the revaluation project that were interpreted by the media and the commissioners as efforts to derail the revaluation. There were other vocal challengers, such as a former commissioner who successfully campaigned as one of the 1985 reassessment opponents.

**Rumors and Distrust.** During the previous 20 years, criminal convictions in the Fayette County Housing Authority and a local city police force and tension during county commissioner meetings led to increased distrust of government. These incidents were added to unsubstantiated stories of “secret deals” for preferential property assessments or the perception that “you have to know someone” to get any help from the county.

**Demographics.** Fayette County is one of the poorer counties in the state, with traditionally high jobless and illiteracy rates and a large senior citizen population. The commissioners were especially concerned about explaining the revaluation process to the elderly.

**Common Problems.** The Fayette County commissioners’ staff and assessment staff also faced challenges common to many local government agencies: understaffing, underfunding, and lack of experience with effective public information strategies. A public information effort was an essential ingredient of the revaluation project, and part of that effort needed to be directed toward county employees to enlist their aid in properly representing the project.

**Key Messages**

For the new attempt at revaluation, the revaluation company identified one key theme (fair and equal) and two subordinate messages (no secrets and nobody’s perfect) for the public information effort.

**Fair and Equal.** The revaluation project is correcting an unfair, out-of-date assessment system. Everyone should pay a fair share—no more, no less.

The main theme of “Fair and Equal” was important to the commissioners, and they wanted it to be repeated everywhere. They used the phrase every time they talked about the project at biweekly commissioners’ meetings, and it was included in most county brochures and correspondence.

Frequently, the use of the word fair prompted protests that nothing about the tax system is fair, and property owners brought up everything from problems at the tax claim office to problems with local township supervisors. Even with such discussions, the theme phrase was effective in reminding property owners of the goal with an easy-to-remember slogan.

**No Secrets.** This is an open and accessible project. Because of rumors of special deals, government corruption, and the earlier failed reassessment attempt, property owners were quick to voice their distrust. The only way to address these suspicions was to emphasize that, “That was yesterday, this is today.” The revaluation company informed people that everything about the project was public record and would be available for review.

The Web site, though criticized by some as an invasion of privacy, was the best weapon in combating charges of corruption (see figure 1). One commissioner described it as “everyone watching everyone.” In addition, frequent newspaper articles, the information phone line, frequent public meetings, and radio and television call-in programs confirmed the commitment to informing the public.

Messages emphasized that although the revaluation company was checking its own work, work would also be checked by the county and outside auditors. The county contracted with several outside vendors to review the project and provide feedback for valuation models and valuation review, for mapping/GIS, and for Pennsylvania’s Clean & Green preferential assessment program for farmland and forestland. Press releases were issued whenever the project received any kind of a positive report from the auditors.
Nobody’s Perfect. The project needs the public’s involvement. This message complemented the information about quality checks. On several occasions the revaluation company made the point that, while any school student would see a grade of 95 percent as an excellent score, a 5 percent error rate for assessments would mean there could be inaccuracies on 3,900 parcels. This was the percentage of error estimated during an early quality assurance check on the image collection system. Such a percentage would represent lots of people who would not be happy, even though the project might be very successful.

A typical part of a meeting update was, “Of course there will be mistakes. No one can record thousands of bits of information for 78,000 properties and get every one perfect. That’s why we’ve built in so many steps for property owners to communicate with us: door hangers, data mailers, e-mail messages, informal review meetings, and, if necessary, formal hearings. Call us if you have a question. We’ll be happy to help you.”

The goal was to return responsibility to the property owner. The revaluation company would be as careful and professional as possible, but the property owner had a stake in ensuring accuracy.

Strategies
To disseminate the key messages, several strategies were employed, based on three main approaches:

1. Keep the project in front of the public as often as possible, not just at key dates or points in the schedule.
2. Use individual questions to determine general attitudes and needs. (If a question was heard more than once, it was interpreted as a widespread concern.)
3. Be responsive. At times a phone call was made or a letter sent, even if it wasn’t expected just to make the point that the company cared.

These three approaches affected every strategy or activity. To put them into practice, the following tools were used in developing a public information plan.

Schedule
The schedule was used as a framework for the public information plan; however, the company looked for ways to talk about the project as often as possible, in as many places as possible. This “all revaluation, all the time” may not work where a more targeted approach is needed; however, a public information flood was required to combat charges of secrecy and corruption.

During the first year, the project remained in the forefront with weekly news releases about data collection locations. Also, updates were presented at a regular meeting for each of the 42 municipalities. Newspaper reporters covered these meetings, and often property owners heard about the project for the first time when they read about their local municipality’s meeting.

Once data collection was finished, the objective was to look for ways to keep the project in the news. In the fall of 2001, preliminary results from the consultant’s audit of data collection were reported. Also, during the downtime around Christmas, a feature-type article with a profile of the project supervisor was submitted, to put a face on the faceless out-of-town company.

Web site activities provided a regular source of news items. The public information pages were available on March 19, 2001. The property records were available online without values on October 22, 2001. Values were available online when preliminary value notices were mailed. The sales search function was added in the middle of the preliminary hearing schedule.

The schedule also dictated the release of project-specific documents produced by the revaluation company: door hanger postcards, data...
verification mailers, and tentative notices of value. These documents are often seen as being operations related; however, they represent an important public information element and should be reviewed for clarity, tone, and effectiveness.

**Media**
Three daily newspapers and one weekly covered Fayette County, plus two newspapers outside the area that reached readers on the outer sections of the county. During the 84 weeks of the public information effort, 94 press releases were issued.

One of the local newspapers had been an active follower of assessment, appeal, and reassessment activities. An investigative reporter had a good working relationship with the chief assessor and had made an effort to educate himself on the subject of assessment. This reporter wrote a series of articles in February 2002, interviewing former assessors about their attempts to work with the old records and reminding the public of the problems with the county’s assessments.

Other newspapers did not make as much of an effort to learn the background and methods of reassessment. Although the public information office provided background materials, most newspapers printed news releases exactly as written. It was more of a challenge when summer interns or new reporters covered municipal meetings; extra time was spent with these reporters to ensure they understood the concepts, particularly the idea of millage rates being reduced.

Several activities were especially well received by the newspapers, both public information activities and actions by the commissioners for the project:

- Hiring auditors to monitor the project
- Conducting a press tour of the revaluation project offices
- Putting property information on the Web site, particularly the sales search feature
- Holding public meetings.
- Arranging a meeting with the editorial board and project leaders.

Media releases were also sent to local radio stations. One prominent station in the county aired a call-in radio program every weekday afternoon. Project representatives were guests on the program more than a dozen times to take calls and provide information. Once again, because project leaders were accessible and informative, the host was very supportive of the project and their efforts, at times defending the project when callers complained. At several points the key messages were being repeated by callers or the host.

Fayette County is in the Pittsburgh media market, and local news comes from the Pittsburgh channels. However, the local newspaper operated a local television station that airs all commissioners’ meetings and taped an occasional current events program called “Editor’s Notebook.” Three programs were taped with the editor, including representatives from both the county and the revaluation company. These programs were especially effective in reaching the senior population.

**Public Officials**
There were three audiences whose reaction had to be considered:

1. The commissioners
2. Property owners
3. County staff members

Each audience required a slightly different type of information.

Fayette County citizens were in the habit of calling the Commissioners’ Office and the Assessment Office with complaints. Internal memos were distributed to staff at each of these offices. These letters and memos tried to anticipate property owners’ questions and usually included answers to questions that had been received in the project or information offices.

The option of scheduling staff briefings was discussed, but the company did not follow through on these meetings because of scheduling challenges. In retrospect, these briefings should have taken place. Such meetings, in addition to letters and memos, would have been useful for responding to comments and questions and would have provided a better forum for exchanging information with county employees.

**Figure 2.** A Herald Standard insert provided comprehensive information about the revaluation project.
It was important for the commissioners to understand what was going on and to have enough information so that they would not be surprised by a property owner’s or reporter’s questions. However, since the commissioners did not have the time to understand every step in the process, providing the right amount of information was a balancing act. If there was a problem, it was important to have a solution before the commissioners were advised of the problem.

The company attempted to identify other points of contact for the public. Who else would property owners call if they had questions? With each new stage of the project, letters were sent to all tax collectors, township supervisors, and borough council members.

Materials
Brochures, flyers, and videos were distributed to all libraries, municipal offices, and as many senior centers as possible. In most cases the materials were developed specifically for the Fayette project.

Video (Project Budgeted). A 10-minute overview video was produced through a local cable advertising channel, enabling production of the video for a low cost and the purchase of six weeks of airtime. Additional cost savings resulted from providing the script and serving as producer to schedule and obtain permission for shooting locations.

Other cable systems ran the video frequently; however, the purchased airtime guaranteed a number of showings and allowed advertisement of the viewing times. The video was shown at meetings, distributed to libraries, and continuously looped at the information booth for the county fair.

Printed Materials (County-Produced).
- Newsletter-format brochure (explaining who, when, why, how)
- Clean & Green brochure (basic information)
- Newspaper guest commentaries (explaining specific issues)
- Newspaper insert, special section before preliminary value notice mailing (see figure 2)
- Newspaper column, Q & A
- Trifold brochure, “Your Final Notice,” included with final value mailing
- Trifold brochure, “How to Prepare for Your Appeal Hearing,” included with notice of hearing date
- One-page flyer, “What happens next?” distributed at informal meetings
- Flyers advertising public meetings
- Flyers posted at informal meetings about Clean & Green deadline, Senior Citizens Rebate Program, How to File an Appeal
- Exit survey form distributed after informal meetings

Web Site
During the first few months of the public information effort, the company stated that property information and photos would be available online (see figure 3). This raised concerns about privacy and safety at several meetings, and a strategy had to be developed early on for explaining why the site was more beneficial than harmful.

The Web site was a useful tool from a public information perspective, and it seemed to be helpful in correcting property data also. The project received approximately 800 e-mail messages with corrections and questions. When people complained about not receiving a data verification mailer or if they wanted to know whether their changes had been corrected, it was helpful to be able to refer them to the Web site. Finally, e-mail was an effective tool for property owners who worked during business hours or wanted to help a neighbor or relative.

Ineffective Efforts
Early Meetings. A few of the public information efforts were not as effective. An advertised public meeting early in the project (while still in the data collection phase) was not well attended. In spite of newspaper and radio announcements, flyers, and announcements at commissioners’ meetings, only two property owners came to the meeting. The company could not discern any reason for this, other than adequate press coverage preventing
the need for questions and answers at this stage. A year later, public meetings were very well attended shortly before informal notices of value were mailed. This better attendance may be partly attributed to direct mailings to property owners who qualified for Clean & Green.

Civics Lessons. Two topics were especially difficult to communicate: (1) millage rates—how they work and how they would drop, and (2) the difference between regular Assessment Office work and the revaluation. Property owners continued to be confused about the difference between the work of the reassessment project and regular Assessment Office tasks.

Toll Free Hotline. The commissioners insisted on a toll-free phone line for property owners in outlying areas or neighboring counties. This line was rarely used, perhaps only three or four times in two years.

Case Conclusion
Fayette County’s revaluation project included several conditions that may or may not apply to other reassessment projects. The county commissioners were committed to the project and were unified in making the process completely open and accessible. The failed attempt in the mid-1980s made the commissioners and the public wary that another attempt might fail too.

The chief assessor was willing to publicize the inequities in the system and, as a result of this publicity, dealt with the question of whether or not he had any responsibility for allowing the system to become so unfair. After learning of the inequities in the system, taxpayers and the media generally wanted the project to succeed. Public opinion remained quiet throughout the project, with few letters to the editor or public comments in commissioners’ meetings during the appeal period.

In spite of a higher-than-expected number of appeals, the consensus seemed to be that the values were fair and the project was a success. The chief assessor estimated that 2,300 to 2,500 of the appeals were related to mineral assessments; mineral parcels were newly added to the assessment rolls and valued by a separate contractor. Some of the real property appeals were attributed to the efforts of a local politician encouraging property owners to appeal now and do the research later. Newspaper articles during the formal appeal process estimated that 15–20 percent of property owners were not showing up for their hearings.

The key messages and the three main approaches outlined earlier in this article were essential to the success of the public information effort. The project developed a reputation for helping property owners, trying to look at the process from the property owners’ perspective. Even property owners who didn’t like the answers they received were generally appeased by the fact that there was a process in place for handling their complaints. Following this process was an important part of the project’s success. When complaints were received from property owners, it was frequently determined that there was a good explanation for the problem and the revaluation project had followed established procedures.

County leadership repeated the key messages as often as possible. During the last six months of the project, community groups were no longer interested in having representatives speak at their meetings because they had already heard the information somewhere else.

Throughout the project, explaining the need for revaluation was helpful in gaining public support. Providing specific examples of inequities was particularly effective.

Key messages and strategies must be tailored to suit the history and attitudes of a specific area, however. The messages for Fayette County were developed after the objections and potential areas of confusion for Fayette County residents had been anticipated. Personal contact
was an important element of the public information effort, effective with media, county employees, and property owners. In order to apply this approach to other projects, public information strategies should include plans for learning the background, history, and key players in the municipality. Key messages should then be communicated to anyone who will have interaction with the public. It is likely that this occurs in an informal way on every project; however, a more deliberate effort to organize the public information plan can result in a revaluation project that is perceived as an organized, professional endeavor, implemented for the benefit of taxpayers in a fair system of assessment.

**Strategic Planning: More Important than Facebook**

A good communication plan comes down to four basic questions:

1. What are you trying to say?
2. Who needs to hear it?
3. How will the information be presented to them?
4. Who will communicate it to them?

**Message: What Do They Need To Know?**

In addition to the ever-present question of taxes and property values in every jurisdiction, there is usually a set of circumstances unique to a particular time and place. Will commercial properties have a greater-than-average increase this year? Have lakefront properties been undervalued, and are they due for an adjustment? Has previously undiscovered new construction recently been added to the rolls? Perhaps political news has affected the public’s perception of city leadership or of the assessment office. Will a new software system improve efficiencies and save money? Each circumstance requires a different message and focus.

As an example, if an assessor expects that commercial properties will experience unusual changes this year, this message and an explanation for why this is happening will require the greater proportion of the communication effort. A key message for the public information campaign could be, “A shortage of commercial development has driven up real estate prices and assessments are now catching up to this trend to ensure that commercial property owners are contributing their fair share.” Each press release, interview with a reporter, Web site project page, and Rotary Club presentation should include a clear, concise explanation to support that message.

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**Audience: Who Needs To Know?**

During any project or period of the year, different groups will need different pieces of information. Senior citizens may not be worried about new construction, but they will worry about what to do if they disagree with the new assessment. Can they appeal?

The strategy will differ, depending on whether there is confusion, lack of information, or misinformation. If there is uncertainty about what property owners know or don’t know, consider a survey to gather information or create a focus group of citizens, real estate professionals, and community leaders.

List each audience group and consider what they need to know. In addition to the general public, the audience may include business owners, the agricultural community, senior citizens, high-value neighborhoods, school boards, real estate professionals, and community leaders. For each group, write a summary of how they are likely to be confused or misinformed.

**Communication Tools: Reaching the Audience**

Once the audience has been identified, think about how each group receives information. Common methods may be the local newspaper, radio station, and cable television public announcement options. For a major project kickoff or story, schedule a meeting with the local editor or editorial board to explain the goals and areas of concern. A good newspaper will be interested in educating the public. Public information efforts must not be restricted to newspapers, however. The influence of the local print newspaper has become a healthy debate between online advocates and newspaper traditionalists; however, the assessor is missing several target audiences by relying only on the newspaper for managing the message.

Many municipalities have Web sites that can be used for public announcements or special project pages. Contact the Web administrator to find out how to submit information for Web site pages. It is often as simple as sending a Word document that the Webmaster can then format for the site.

To reach business owners, use the local Chamber of Commerce newsletter or professional group meeting. Senior centers often host speakers about current topics. Farm bureaus or 4-H groups are ways to reach the agricultural community. To reach a specific neighborhood, consider meeting with community organizations or organized neighborhood groups. Local colleges, and even high schools, have broadcasting programs for engaging students in the production of an informational video that
gives them valuable experience and provides a public service.

**Task Assignment: Who Will Communicate?**

Once a plan is in place, a clear list of action items with tasks and assignments will ensure the work is done. Consider resources, such as a government communications office, an office clerk with good writing skills, or a partnership with a local college to provide an intern for a special project. Engage support from contractors working on the project.

**Summary**

Some assessors are concerned that giving advance notice to a group that may be unhappy with the expected results will only cause more problems; however, a proactive approach is almost always best. If, after a thorough review of the message and audiences, it is determined that a defensive approach is best, then an equally detailed plan for anticipated questions and responsive activities should be created. All property owners need to understand that the assessment office is following the laws of the state and municipality, professional assessment practices are being used, and there is a process in place for questions and challenges. If this information is clearly communicated, property owners are more likely to follow established channels for appeal or protest.

Regardless of whether traditional methods such as brochures and press releases or current techniques such as a social media account are used, it is important to know the objective. Simply throwing information out there won’t achieve the goal. Through a regular, steady flow of information, a base of confidence in how assessments are being handled can be built so that when the inevitable problem comes up, property owners will give the assessment office the benefit of the doubt that everything is being handled in a professional and fair way.

**Reference**


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**The Changing Name of Public Relations**

*Michael Turney, Ph.D., ABC*

In the late nineteenth century, when public relations was first emerging as a profession, the terms most commonly used to describe the activity were *publicity* and *promotion*. Although a few companies created internal units they called public relations departments—Westinghouse became one of the first and biggest to do so in 1889—most large companies continued to use terms such as *publicity department*, *press office*, and *literary bureau*, rather than public relations.

Public relations became the preferred term in the 1920s. Preferences began changing fairly quickly and steadily after the World War I. In part, this was due to the public’s increasing awareness of the field fueled by the aggressive and high-profile promotional tactics of Edward Bernays and other practitioners who called themselves *public relations counselors*.

More and more American organizations began hiring public relations people and, with the exception of government agencies which had special reasons for not using it, most of them adopted the term *public relations* to describe their attempts to enhance their relationships with their customers and other constituents. By the mid-twentieth century, the vast majority of large American corporations had internal units responsible for public relations activities, and almost all of them used the term *public relations* in their units’ names, whether they were departments, divisions, or offices.

A few companies still used terms like *publicity department*, *promotions department*, or *press office*, but not very many. From the 1940s through the first-half of the 1970s, public relations had very little competition as the preferred name for this growing field of activity.


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