

**To the Mayor and Members of the City Council****May 6, 2025**

Page 1 of 1

**SUBJECT: CONTRACT WITH THE MARILLA GROUP FOR CONTRACTED
CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER**

The purpose of this informal report is to outline an upcoming proposal to the City Council to contract with The Marilla Group, LLC d/b/a Sunny Black for services in support of a reorganization and service delivery enhancements of the Communications & Public Engagement (CPE) Department.

The Marilla Group is a marketing and communications consultancy focused on empowering public organizations to achieve their communication goals, elevate their presence, and build positive relationships with their community.

In December 2024, City of Fort Worth engaged The Marilla Group to do a strategic review of CPE. In the months that followed, The Marilla Group conducted dozens of interviews with key internal stakeholder groups on strategy, coordination, and key objectives of communications in the department and citywide.

The Marilla Group's assessment resulted in recommendations to restructure CPE to better serve the City's strategic and crisis communication needs. The final report is attached to this IR.

Successfully implementing the reorganization of the department and related goals will require significant support and leadership, however, the department director (Chief Communications Officer) and key leadership positions are currently vacant.

To support the effective implementation of the department's reorganization, it is proposed the City of Fort Worth enter a new 6-month contract with The Marilla Group, renewable for up to two 6-month terms not to exceed 18 months.

The contract will begin at \$31,500 per month beginning May 15, 2025 and will tier down to \$21,500 per month once the assistant director position for SHOP has been filled. The contract will end when deliverables are completed and the Chief Communications Officer position is filled.

Funds for this contract will be allocated from the CPE departmental budget from salary savings accrued from the vacant positions. No additional funding is required.

The proposed contract will be brought before Council for consideration on May 13, 2025. If you have questions or concerns related to this report, please contact Interim Chief Communications Officer Bethany Warner, 817-392-6121.

Jesus "Jay" Chapa
City Manager

Attachment



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COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNICATIONS ASSESSMENT FOR THE CITY OF FORT WORTH

FINAL REPORT

Prepared for: City Manager Jay Chapa
April 30, 2025



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Table of Contents

Executive Summary **3**

Findings **4**

Assessment: Key Insights **5**

Highlights **8**

Organizational Restructure Recommendations **9**

Communication Network Recommendations **12**

Action Items **14**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Marilla Group conducted more than 40 interviews with three key stakeholder groups in the City of Fort Worth: **elected officials, city leadership, and communication professionals** across various departments, particularly those with external-facing responsibilities. These discussions revealed a widespread concern among stakeholders about the lack of a cohesive strategy for city communications and an absence of coordination between departments.

The City of Fort Worth invests \$6 million into its own Communications and Public Engagement department (CPE). Of this, half of the department is allocated to 311, which serves a critical customer service function and supports the MyFW app, while the remaining half is dedicated to serving the City's communication efforts and essentially **operates as a newsroom**. This includes managing communication platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, the City's website, the external City News newsletter, the internal Roundup newsletter, and public education efforts. In the most recent community survey conducted by the City of Fort Worth, **almost 50% of residents say they still get their news about the City from traditional media**, but there is no media relations, strategic or crisis communication plan for the City.

This means the City is **investing millions of dollars into a resource that does not have the reach of traditional media**. There is a reactive media line that is not staffed with trained Public Information Officers (PIOs) and there is no proactive outreach to press. A proposed org chart in this report shows how the City can intentionally address Fort Worth City News, media relations, crisis communication, 311 and create an "agency" function - a shift from a solely "newsroom" function. This shift will allow CPE to support 311, develop content and support internal department requests for **communication, content development, and community engagement while cohesively maintaining the City's brand and message**. The pieces and talent are already within the City, and we recommend reallocating positions within the City to better serve the organization.

Survey respondents say CPE **does not work with a sense of urgency or serve their needs**, causing many to "go rogue" and do things on their own. Leadership is frustrated with the lack of cohesive messaging in City communications and social media quality that is sometimes subpar and does not represent the City as a unified whole. Respondents said there was a need for a strong external representative for the City, which does not currently exist. Elected officials, city leadership, and department heads are concerned about crisis communication, because **there is no continuity of operations** for City communications and there is a need for tabletop exercises, workshops, and trainings.

High Level Strengths

- Strong communicators are in place.
- Strong output of content.
- MyFW app is a strong City resource.
- According to the 2023 City Community Survey, 36% of respondents get their news from the City website.
- City News open rate is 35%-40%.
- New style guide and updated social media policy is in place.
- 311 is a well-oiled machine.
- Public Education Specialists are valued for their support in grassroots efforts, public meetings, and community engagement.
- Communications Specialists are contributing content to the City's website, app, social media, and through an external and internal newsletter.

High Level Opportunities

- There is no media relations, strategic or crisis communication plan for the City.
- CPE has been operating as the City's newsroom, and thus unable to quickly support other departments or elected officials' needs.
- Misalignment on content development and social media strategy citywide.
- Concerns about crisis communication and continuity of operations.
- Concerns over City communications being prepared for FIFA and the next bond election.
- Staff is hesitant to support Council requests because of concerns of when it's appropriate to support them. A formal policy is urgently needed.
- Website is dated, which limits content production; having 200 editors leads to branding inconsistencies.
- City GovDelivery email lists need segmentation and data cleansing.
- No tabletop training since 2019.

ASSESSMENT: KEY INSIGHTS

79.5%

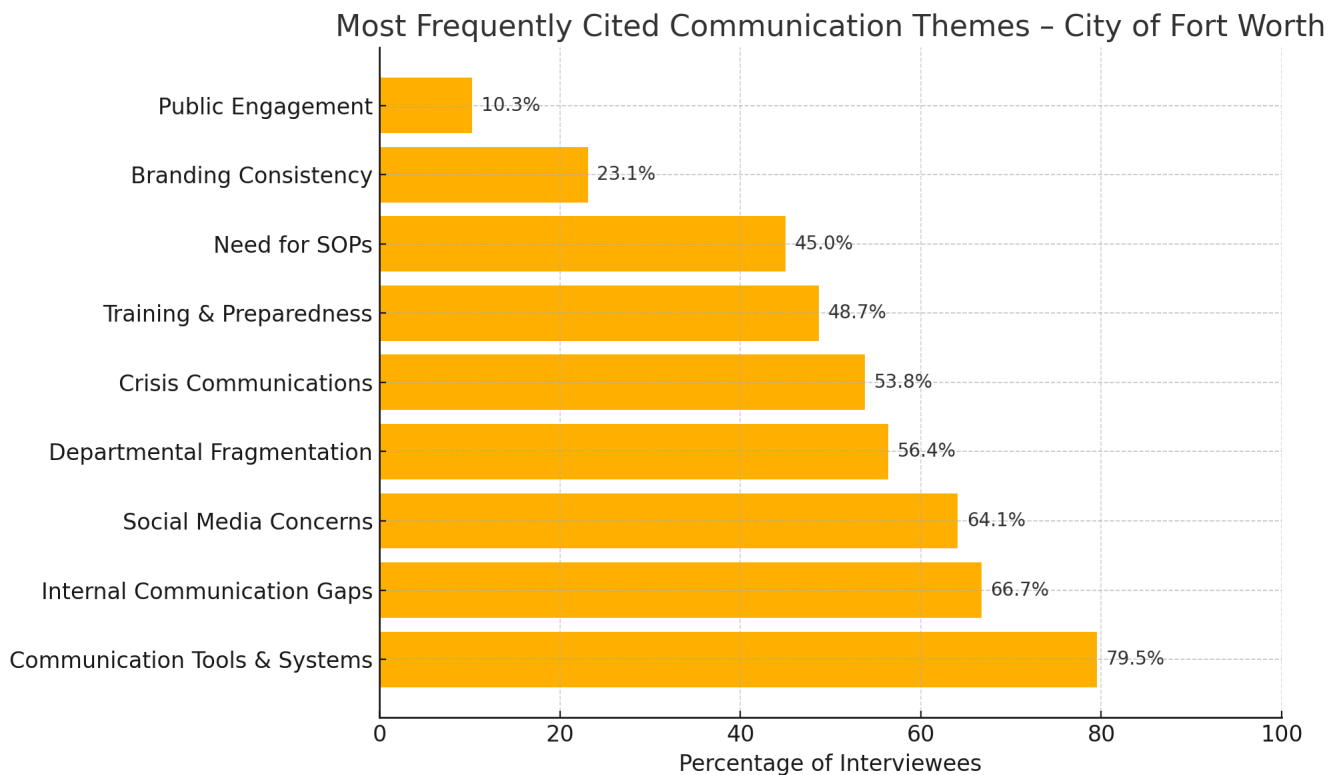
raised concerns about the **effectiveness, usability, or consistency** of the City's communication platforms

66.7%

described internal communication as **siloed or inconsistent**

64.1%

discussed challenges with **social media use**, including fragmentation, tone, and ownership



ASSESSMENT: KEY INSIGHTS

This summary reflects key insights from more than 40 in-depth interviews with City of Fort Worth leadership, council members, and communications staff. Themes below emerged across the majority of participants.

Communication Platforms

79.5% raised concerns about the **effectiveness, usability, or consistency** of the City's communication infrastructure.

- *"The intranet doesn't make it easy for staff to find the information they need to respond to residents."*
- *"We're using multiple websites and formats, and it's not clear we're all following the same city branding."*
- *"Departments are stretched - everyone wants more communication support, but staffing is limited."*

Internal Coordination

66.7% described **internal communication as siloed or inconsistent**, with few opportunities to collaborate across departments.

- *"Each time we try to coordinate across departments, it feels like we're starting from scratch."*
- *"We don't have time built in to connect across teams - it's hard to collaborate at a leadership level."*
- *"We need to break down silos and make communication more proactive between departments."*

Social Media Use

64.1% raised issues with **fragmentation, tone, and ownership of social media** channels.

- *"Departments prefer to maintain their own social media channels; there's hesitation around centralization."*
- *"We need clearer guidance on which messages go where: press, social media, email, and how the tone should differ."*
- *"We've shifted heavily to social media and rarely do press releases or media events anymore."*

Department-Level Autonomy & Fragmentation

56.4% noted that departments often operate independently, creating **confusion around strategy, priorities, and resource allocation**.

- *"Departments tend to operate independently; there's no consistent citywide communication approach."*
- *"Some groups have their own strategy and do their own thing, which can lead to mixed messaging."*
- *"Everyone's asking for more support, but they're all working off different playbooks."*

ASSESSMENT: KEY INSIGHTS

Crisis Communications

53.8% expressed concern about the **City's lack of a scalable, structured crisis communication system.**

- *"Crisis communication is too dependent on a single person - it's not a sustainable model."*
- *"We need formal SOPs for different crisis scenarios so we're not making it up as we go."*
- *"Right now, our crisis approach is more reactive than proactive - we need a real plan."*

Training & Preparedness

48.7% mentioned a **need for training, especially in media relations and standard procedures.**

- *"When I started, I had no media training - I was thrown into interviews without preparation."*
- *"Many department heads could benefit from formal training on how to engage with the media."*
- *"We need structured onboarding and SOPs so roles are clear and transitions are smooth."*

Need for SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures)

45% cited the absence of SOPs as a **systemic gap affecting efficiency and resilience.**

- *"Having SOPs in place would reduce stress and ensure continuity if someone has to step away."*
- *"We need SOPs not just for crises but for daily workflows - it would save time and clarify roles."*
- *"Standardizing procedures would help us move from reactive to proactive communication."*

Brand Consistency

23.1% noted inconsistent branding and a **lack of clear, up-to-date identity standards.**

- *"Our branding guidelines are not consistently used across departments."*
- *"Without a clear citywide brand, things feel a little scattered — we need leadership alignment."*
- *"Finalizing the new branding package would help us all get on the same page."*

Public Engagement

10.3% referenced opportunities to **evolve how the City connects with residents** — especially outside of traditional settings.

- *"We need to make public engagement more dynamic, think neighborhood events, mobile outreach."*
- *"We're focusing more on meeting residents where they are, not just expecting them to come to us."*
- *"There's room to modernize how we invite feedback from the public, especially digitally."*

Communication Challenges and Needs

- Frustration with delayed responses and inconsistent writing quality when requesting content from City communications.
- Critical need for graphic designers and quick turnarounds.
- Better process for capital improvement project updates.
- Desire for pre- and post-policy briefs for council meetings and similar proactive efforts.
- Lack of proactive outreach to assess communication needs and storytelling opportunities.
- Desire for spokesperson/media training.

Unified Messaging and Crisis Preparedness

- Need for aligned, cohesive citywide voice, branding, and messaging across all platforms.
- Concerns over important content being drowned out due to high volume of City News.
- Critical external communication gaps in capital improvement project updates.
- Concerns over continuity of operations for City communications and crises.
- Desire for more tabletop exercises to strengthen crisis preparedness and response.

Autonomy, Trust, and Resource Gaps

- Departments are resistant to centralization due to concerns over autonomy.
- Noticeable lack of trust between departments and CPE.
- Departments and elected officials reluctant to engage CPE due to past unresponsiveness.
- Critical need for more graphic designers to support citywide communications with aligned, effective, and timely products. (Given the City's heavy reliance on social media, addressing this talent gap must be a priority).
- Monthly PIO meetings are not an effective use of time, as they lack structured opportunities for meaningful cross-departmental alignment.

Gaps Mentioned Across All Stakeholder Groups

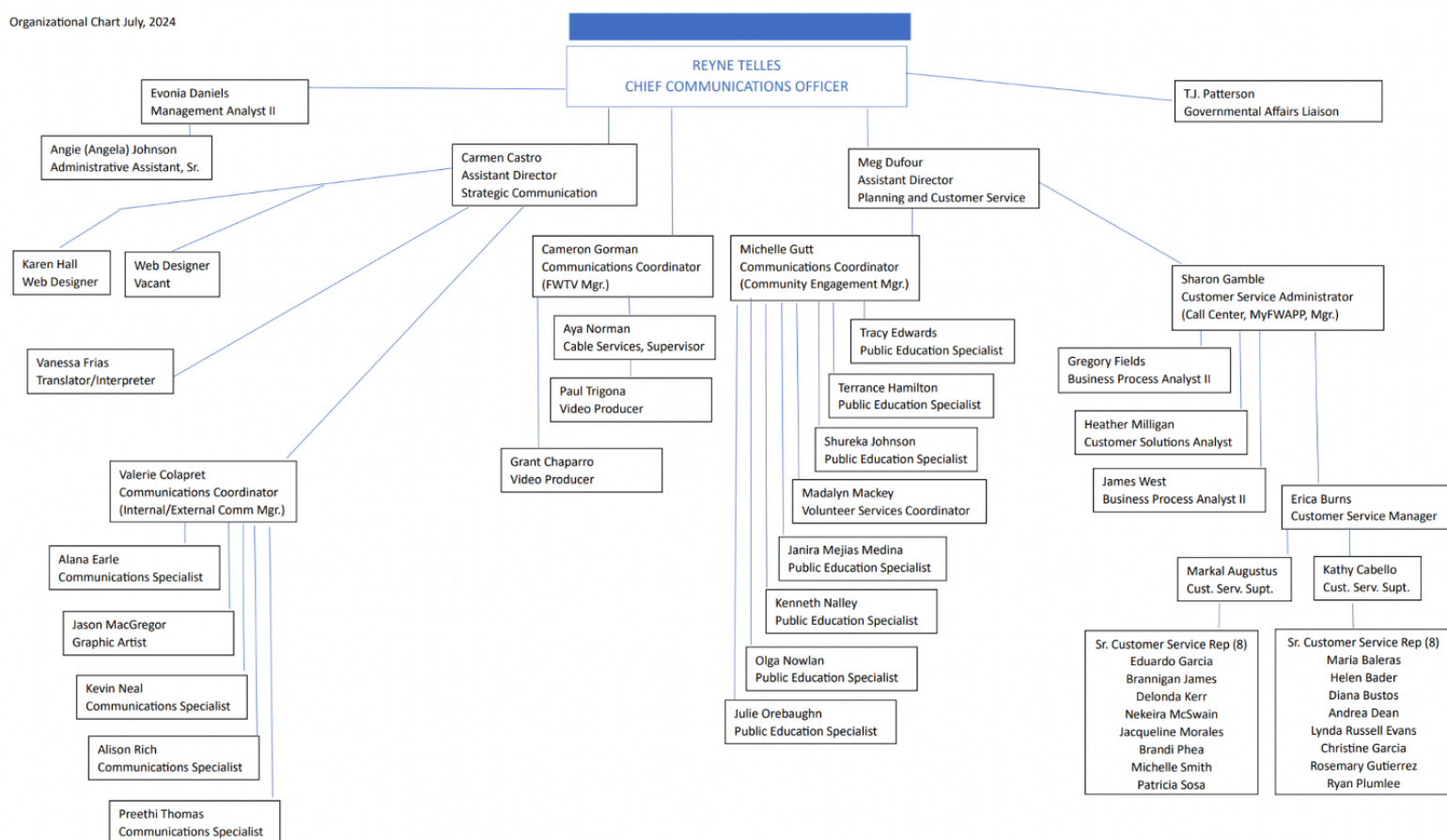
- No communication plan for the City.
- Frustration with delayed responses and inconsistent writing quality when requesting content from City communications.
- Departments "go rogue" and manage their own communications because of frustrations with delayed responses from CPE or being told there is a long workload queue.
- Concerns over unified messaging across all City channels and departments.
- How to attain high quality and cohesive graphics, social media, and content across all City channels and departments.



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CURRENT CPE ORGANIZATON CHART

Organizational Chart July, 2024

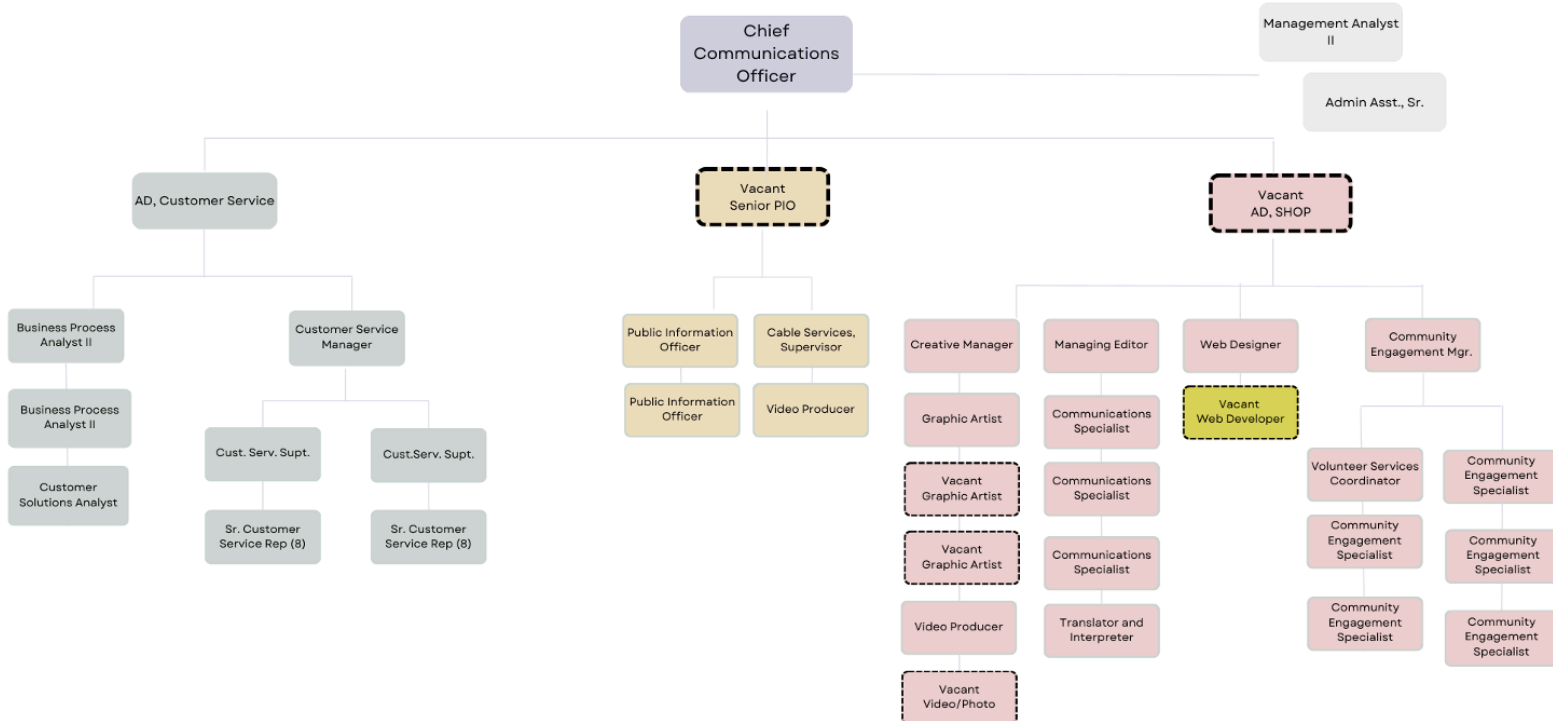


REIMAGINE CPE

The newly structured City Communications team is designed to **enhance collaboration, streamline messaging, and ensure clear, effective communication across all departments.** This updated organizational framework strengthens Fort Worth's ability to inform, engage, and connect with residents, stakeholders, and media while maintaining transparency and responsiveness.

City of Fort Worth

COMMUNICATIONS & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



HIGH-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS



Development of SHOP (Strategic Hub for Outreach and Production)

We propose the creation of a specialized creative vertical within CPE that consolidates community engagement professionals, graphic designers, videographers, photographers, writers, and web developers. This team will serve as a centralized creative resource, ensuring high-quality content, a cohesive voice, and strong branding across all City departments, Mayor, and Council. With an increased number of graphic designers centralized within SHOP, production times will be reduced, and the team will implement efficient systems to streamline incoming requests from both City departments and Council. This structure will enhance workflow efficiency, improve turnaround times, and ensure cohesive communications. The content created for other departments can be used for the City's channels.



Strategic Reallocation of Communication Professionals

The current distribution of communication professionals lacks a clear strategic structure. We recommend a targeted reallocation to better support City departments, Mayor, and Council. To be respectful of budget considerations, we recommend a department restructuring, utilizing current positions for new hires for the creative team and reassigning two positions to the Public Information Officer (PIO) vertical to support media relations and crisis communication. There are currently two vacant Assistant Director (AD) positions, 1 vacant Public Education Specialist position, and 2 vacant creative positions. We also recommend the reallocation of 1 additional web designer to SHOP to support department updates to various City webpages.



Prioritize Training and Professional Development

Establish a structured training program focused on content development, media relations, spokesperson training, and crisis communication to strengthen skills across all levels of city communications. Ensure ongoing professional development opportunities, including workshops, tabletop exercises, and external training, to keep up with evolving industry best practices. Establish continuity of operations for City communications and clear protocols for crises.

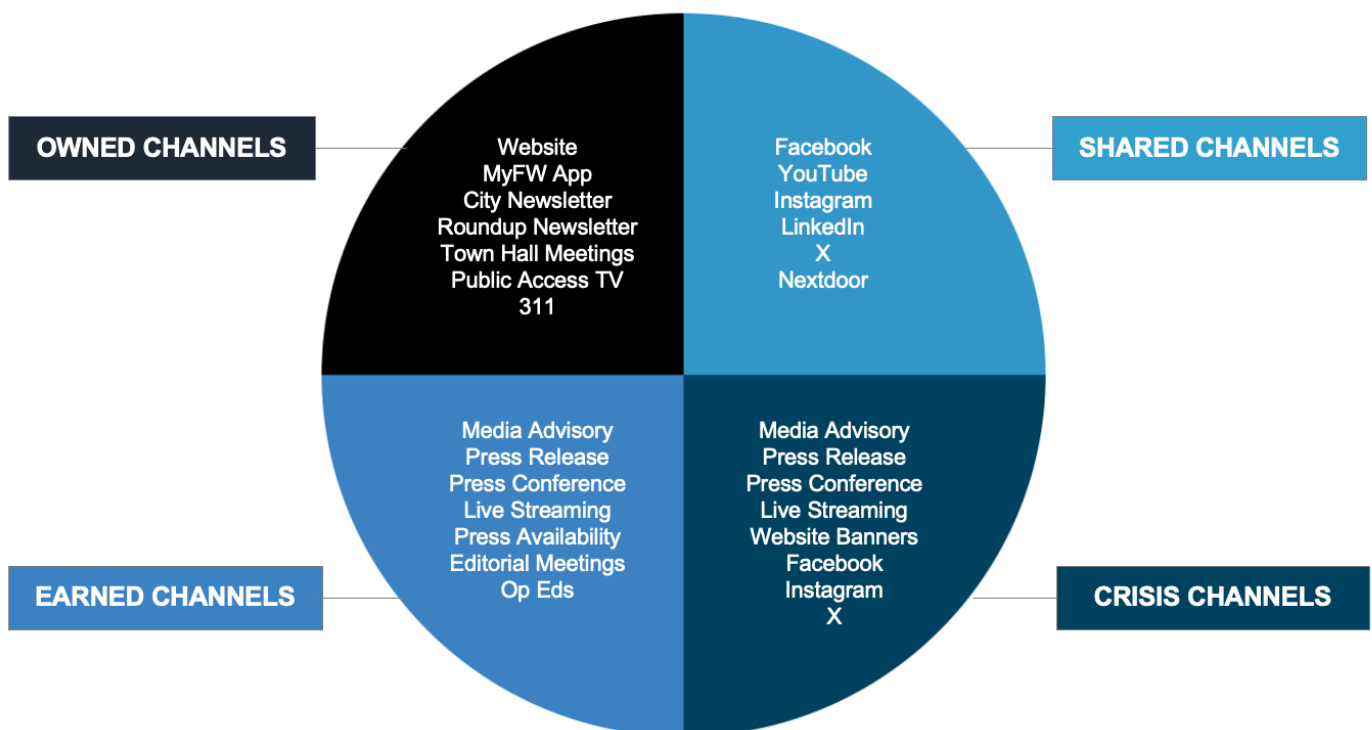


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DEVELOP FW ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION NETWORK

The City of Fort Worth must develop its own communication network. This gives the City the ability to utilize multiple channels for communication, allowing for cohesive branding and messaging. **We have identified the following channels and noted which channels are optimal for use during crises.**

City of Fort Worth Communication Network



HIGH-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS



Development of City Communication Network

When an organization begins to distribute its own communication, it must invest in the formal adoption of an organizational communication network. This allows the organization to understand all of the channels at its disposal, and allow for strategy on how best to utilize the various channels and when. Currently, because CPE is primarily operating as a City newsroom, there is no focus on earned media, such as press conferences, media availability, press releases, raw footage availability, etc. This is a missed opportunity for the City, because earned media allows for the potential reach of thousands more people. Once we understand which channels are shared, earned, and owned, we can decide which to focus on during crises. These channels allow us to track data and metrics on reach, engagement, and impact.



Understand and Implement Optimal Use of Channels

Currently, CPE is producing a lot of content that mainly goes to the City website or social media channels. Sometimes the content is posted all at one time, which means data is not driving the digital distribution of content. QR codes are used on social media, which is not useful because most people are viewing social media on their phones and therefore cannot scan the code. We see “Translated in Spanish below” on City social media posts. This is unnecessary, as users can change language settings on Facebook and Instagram. This is a poor utilization of critical real estate immediately under the post, which in best practices is used to hook the audience. It is imperative that we understand the optimal utilization for each channel and build strategy that allows for the cohesive amplifying of our messaging. We also recommend that data drive navigation and user experience for the City website.



Have Clear Strategy for Channels During Crises

When in crisis, we cannot use every channel at our disposal. But if we know all of our channels, and which channels have what type of reach/audience, then we can appropriately use **specific** channels during crises. This is the key component of a communication network for a municipality. It is key to know which channels are most effective in reaching the most people and focus content on those channels in the immediate aftermath of a crisis.

ACTION ITEMS

Establish SHOP as a Centralized Resource

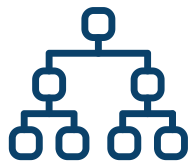
- Develop a clear framework for SHOP to manage and streamline design, content, outreach, and communication requests.
- Define workflows and service-level expectations for City departments and Council.
- Develop policy that delineates between campaigning and City communications.
- Absorb the current community engagement group into SHOP to enhance coordination and efficiency.



Reallocate & Restructure CPE

Align **three leadership positions** within CPE to oversee:

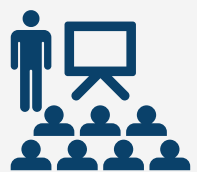
- **PIO** (media relations and crisis communication)
- **SHOP** (requests for community outreach/engagement, creative services, and content development; this would include brand management, writing, graphic design, video, web, photography, supporting town halls, etc.)
- **311** (MyFW app, public-facing inquiries, service response, and accessibility).



Enhance Communications Training Across Key Areas

We have identified three critical areas where additional training is needed to improve the effectiveness and consistency of citywide communications:

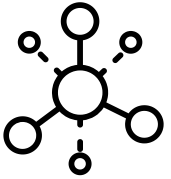
- **Content Development** – Strengthen writing, branding, messaging, and storytelling skills to improve the quality and timeliness of City communications across all platforms.
- **Media Relations & Spokesperson Training** – Equip key personnel, including PIOs, City leadership, and Council Members, with the skills to effectively engage with the media, conduct interviews, and deliver key messages confidently.
- **Crisis Communication & Response** – Improve preparedness through structured training, simulations, and/or response planning to ensure a clear, coordinated approach during emergencies. Develop a clear crisis communications protocol, ensuring role clarity, messaging processes, backup personnel, and efficient response during emergencies to ensure rapid, consistent, and accurate public communication during crises.



ACTION ITEMS

Develop FW Communication Network

We have developed a communication network for the City of Fort Worth. This will allow us to focus on the reach and engagement of each channel, diversify how we are distributing content, and know which channels to program during a crisis.



City channels have thus far primarily focused on owned channels. The communication network will allow us to focus on a wide array of channels, including:

- City website
- MyFW app
- City newsletter
- Town hall meetings
- Public access channels
- 311
- Traditional media
- Social media
- Live streaming
- Opinion pieces/blogs

Develop an Aligned Communications Strategy and Strengthen Media Relations

- Establish a citywide communications strategy to ensure consistency across departments and platforms.
- Implement a proactive media relations plan, this may include pre- and post-policy briefings, to better inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders.
- Standardize brand and messaging across departments to ensure a cohesive citywide voice in public communications.
- Strengthen and align external communications efforts and crisis response with City identity and brand.





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