

LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICES COMMUNICATION WITH RESPECT TO RESIDENTS OF NEW CONCEPT OF MANAGEMENT

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Abstract:

The local government should both inspire social communication and, by the proper transmission of information, create the conditions for an agreement. Currently, local authorities' power is gained through communication, discussion, and understanding of each other's needs; their role is no longer limited to the information transfer. Offices of the local government are bound to be involved in increasing the activity of the whole community. A resident is thereby the most important customer for the local government offices. This results from, among other factors, the growth of civic self-awareness, a sense of common responsibility for the local community, as well as the implementation of the new management concepts, such as "New Public Management" and "Good Governance". The goal of this article is to highlight the role and identify the forms of communication with the local resident, which is, among others, due to the local government awareness of the impact which the customers' satisfaction has on the overall government image. The empirical part of this elaboration is based on own observations, examination of secondary sources and primary research on marketing communication. Information from the customers should be the reference point for determining the direction of improvement of the services provided. At present, it is important for the officials to be open for the customers' needs: both to inform about the current activities and transparency of procedures, as well as obtaining the customers' feedback. The intention of the author is to inspire discussion about the abovementioned issues.

Keywords: communication, authority, local government, management concepts

1. INTRODUCTION

Local government offices must serve the citizens by their availability, confidentiality, reliability and quality. The target groups of communication consumers vary, requiring a thorough understanding of their needs and the matching action. Society developed from the position of the citizen-petitioner to the position of the citizen-customer. Building lasting relationships based on mutual trust and mutual benefits is possible through the improvement, modification, and adapting the service levels to the different needs of the market. The official assumes the role of a customer adviser, helping the resident with the variety of legal regulations; the official also becomes the manager of public affairs who exceeds the best results with the least resources – the official is aware of the citizen-customers' needs. Well served resident will have a good opinion about the functioning of the office, which in turn has a positive impact on its image. Through good communication, local government offices receive feedback from the residents about the level of satisfaction which the services provide. It is important that the officials remain open to the citizen's needs, inform them of the office's actions, preserve the transparency of procedures, and obtain customer's feedback. Local government office communication addressed to the residents is primarily meant to increase their involvement in the affairs of the region, to rally support for action, integration, creating the current of cooperative trust, developing the personal responsibility for taking action, etc. Activities such as informing, motivating and educating are therefore essential. The offices of the local government units in Poland then note the implementation of the management concept engaging the managerial approach used in the private sector, such as the "New Public Management" and "Good Governance". This article aims to highlight the changes in the role of the resident and to present the forms of customer communication in terms of these concepts. In order to achieve this goal the use of personal observations and the study of the secondary and primary research were implemented. This article is only an inspiration for discussion on the abovementioned issues.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article presents the results of the secondary research along with the results of the survey - the pilot study. The secondary research was based on the sources available on the Internet. The primary research was conducted between September and December 2014. The surveys were based on a questionnaire (prepared in advance). Their aim was, among others, to obtain the knowledge about the forms of communication with the local government units' offices. The study, due to the volume requirements, only brought to closer attention the results concerning the forms of social communication. In a pilot study 60 randomly selected residents of the West Pomeranian region's municipalities responded (rural communes, urban-rural and urban). The random-layer selection was applied. The questionnaire consisted mostly of closed questions, appropriately scaled, which enabled the assessment of certain elements and allowed the respondent to make his own choice in some cases.

3. THE ESSENCE OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNITS DIRECTED TO THE RESIDENTS

Marketing communication is the action directed at all the participants of certain environment, especially at the existing and potential customers of the particular tender. Here it is important to define its objectives and customers, because there is a close relationship between the expectations and needs of the customers and the choice of forms of communication. Communication is focused on the creation and constant stimulation of the interaction between the participants of the whole process (Wiktor, 2013). Depending on the audience, one can talk about the internal and external communication. Internal communication of the local government units is focused on a group of entities (individuals, institutions) that are permanently related with it, primarily residents, entrepreneurs operating in the area, as well as employees of the local government. One of the major recipients of internal communication are in fact the local residents. Internal market, which consists of the residents and the locally operating organizations, is in fact the primary target market in territorial marketing (Szromnik, 2012).

Effective actions of the local government require changes in the approach to the customer; those should be focused on creating the image of the office as an active entity, quickly responding to the needs of its customers. It is an important element to provide a good service to the customers, which is

largely influenced by the attitude of the staff. Nowadays, visitors are becoming more demanding and claim their rights. They become more aware of their needs and are competent, confident, and know how to use their knowledge and experience, so they expect special treatment. Communication must therefore change, especially that today the statement that the resident is condemned to the certain office is barred. Understanding the needs of the residents is the primary task of governments, and the long-term protection of the continuous improvement of their living conditions becomes the local government basic aim.

Through proper communication, local government units can manage the resident satisfaction, as it affects the process of gaining or regaining the public's trust, improves the image of the administration, allows us to see things from the perspective of the citizen-customer - so it becomes possible to efficiently implement new solutions in response to the changing customers' expectations. Local government offices should form the basis for the incorporation of the specific marketing sensor, "which is the study of the needs and expectations of different target groups (Domański, 1997) into their functioning systems, so one could diagnose them and provide information to help the offices meet those needs. Offices, assuming the role of the messenger, must be aware of what customers do they intend to reach, and what reaction do they expect; to know how to properly encode the message through words and symbols so that it is properly received by the recipient; they need to choose the right communication channel, the medium of their information.

In the era of the information society and technology development, local governments must also provide ways of communication with residents using such forms, eg. Local government websites and social media (Smalec, Wykorzystanie mediów społecznościowych w komunikacji marketingowej samorządów, 2014). These services should offer not only the basic information that can be found in the obligatory Public Information Bulletin, but also data that allows the user to gain knowledge about the benefits of a municipality, the prospects of its development, to encourage the user to visit or invest in its territory, allowing users to feel a common bond, conveying the atmosphere of the place, or facilitate certain activities. One of the manifestations of the development of the information society is the creation of the proper e-administration (Smalec, E-administration as a mean of communication between government bodies and their environment, 2013), which is a high priority for the European Union. Local government units which are using the Internet are creating new channels of communication with the public, improve contact, create friendly atmosphere (Dąbrowska, Janoś-Kreso i Wódkowski, 2009). The overriding principle of the local government offices is to meet the needs of the citizens, and widely understood communication process is most helpful with this process.

It should be emphasized that the forms of local government office communication with the local residents can vary immensely, both the personal interaction at the office, all kinds of events, as well as promoting participation in the activities of the local government through, among others, debates or public consultations. As mentioned before, those might be also the virtual activities. It is important to communicate not only the current problems, but also strategic issues, without creating the conflict, provoking misunderstandings and sensation-seeking.

4. NEW CONCEPTS OF MANAGEMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION - SELECTED ASPECTS

It should be emphasized that also in Poland, currently, the role of the resident is increasing and changing in the local government office communication process. In Western countries, the relation of »local government - local communities« is seen in terms of »provider of services (government) - resident (client)« (Wojciechowski, 2003). Local government should inspire social communication and create the conditions for an agreement to be reached by the transfer of information. Currently, local authorities' power is gained through communication, discussion and understanding of each other's needs; their role is no longer to barely transfer information. Social participation, implementation of partnership and mutual commitment become mutually important. This commitment is a prerequisite for democracy and the constitutes the foundation of civil society (Frost, 2003). Offices of the local government must be involved in increasing the activity of the whole community, it is however necessary to reflect on its scope. A resident is treated as a special customer performing multiple roles such as: citizen influencing the decision-making processes, taxpayer, voter and consumer of public services. Local government's strategic functions become separated from the operational functions, public services are often delegated to the competing organizations outside of local government administration. The separation of politics from the administrative functions in the local government is

very popular in the United States, among others. According to the assumptions of the managerial approach in the local government sector, municipal authorities act as a manager, and the city is understood as a company fulfilling its developmental strategies and activating the decision-making processes. The difficulty may sometimes arise in accommodating the interests of the private sector (businesses) and residents, but also in encouraging the local government to implement a business style of operating.

According to the concept of "New Public Management" governments must work together with the citizens, increasing the level of responsiveness to their needs and expectations, which should translate into an increased level of public trust (Denhart i Denhart, 2000). This concept is an attempt to apply the principles and management models known from the public administration.

Administration is a provider of particular services and some of their actions may be provided on a competitive basis. This provides the focus on the citizen as a customer who should receive the highest quality service. It is observed that the local authorities are more successful where there is a greater citizen engagement (Putnam, 1995). Public administration management should use standard management tools used in the private sector. The organizational culture of the local government offices must be characterized by flexibility, innovation, problem solving and entrepreneurship.

Another one of the management concepts - "Good Governance"- is based on the assumption that the administration is a form of cooperation between different subjects to solve social issues. Participation, consensus, equality and inclusion are of most importance. This concept is focused on the citizen as a member entitled to the full participation in public decision making process. Such public participation of the local residents can sometimes raise concerns of the local authorities which result from the need to undergo an evaluation or public consultation. The foundations of this concept are participation, transparency, response to the public needs, equality and focus on consensus, accountability, and effectiveness. The local authorities must implement certain forms of communication and transparent procedures to facilitate the articulation of the residents' needs. It is the basis for the construction of the sound principles of local democracy, which allows the development of the territorial unit.

The new management concepts introduced in the local government administration are primarily focused on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of its operations. The use of market mechanisms in the management of public services is bound to provide the services better adapted to the social needs. The introduction of these management methods also seeks to use more flexible methods of local government activities, personnel policy with the appropriate motivation and the establishment of a manager responsible for performance results. In France, a very popular administration instrument is a contract management, a choice of providers (including private providers), based on an assessment of the costs and benefits. In the Netherlands the task-oriented departments in the local government offices were replaced by the structure based on the areas of interaction, which, based on the role of the citizen, were as follows: the development of the city - citizens; district management - residents; services - consumers, customers. The Spanish authorities have initiated the creation of local institutions allowing the citizens to solve many different issues in one place (one-stop shop) to improve the quality of service. Citizen makes a request, regardless of which department is authorized to act upon it (Zalewski, 2005).

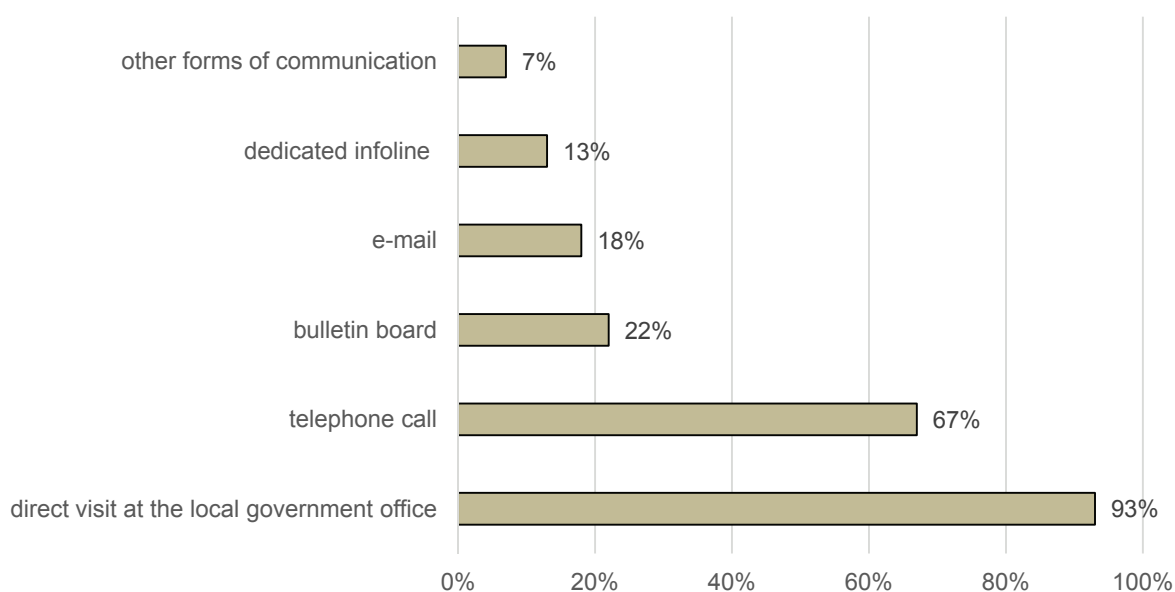
5. SELECTED RESULTS

Local government authorities must remember that even attractive and professionally transferred information will not be accepted by the residents if the services which they are provided with do not meet their needs and expectations. The local community requires to be treated as a fully equal partner. Assuming that the information may be a way of manipulating the opinions and attitude of the residents in a short time will lead to negating the decisions taken by the authorities or even to the prolonged social conflicts. In a pilot study 60 randomly selected residents of the West Pomeranian region's municipalities responded. Most respondents would like to participate in the public consultations -about 60% of the respondents indicated this option. A very small percentage of those people, however, participated in such consultations. Such consultations are one of the forms of social dialogue. In many Western European countries with an established local democracy the widespread practice of public consultation is an integral element of civic participation. In Poland this idea is growing more acceptable by both the local authorities and the residents.

The residents would also take an active part in the public needs survey to share their observations. Unfortunately, local government offices rarely carry out a systematic study of the residential expectations. This situation is explained mainly by the lack of funds, which in the era of omnipresent technology seems to be an unsuccessful attempt to explain the absence of the offices' own initiative. The surveys available in the offices do not fully comply with their function, because a lot of people do not notice them or is not encouraged to fill them. The opinions of the respondents regarding their impact on the matters of their community are disturbing. 62% of the respondents believe that they do not have any such impact. This in turn may be due to the fact that they do not participate in the public consultations or the public needs surveys and do not share their opinions or views from the assumption that it will change nothing after all.

Figure 1 shows the ways in which the inhabitants of the municipalities connect with the local government office. As can be observed, the residents prefer personal contact, yet the possibility to call the office is also significant. Bulletin board plays a role especially for rural and semi-urban areas, and the e-mail is popular mainly among residents of urban municipalities.

Figure 1: Ways to contact the office for the inhabitants of the municipality

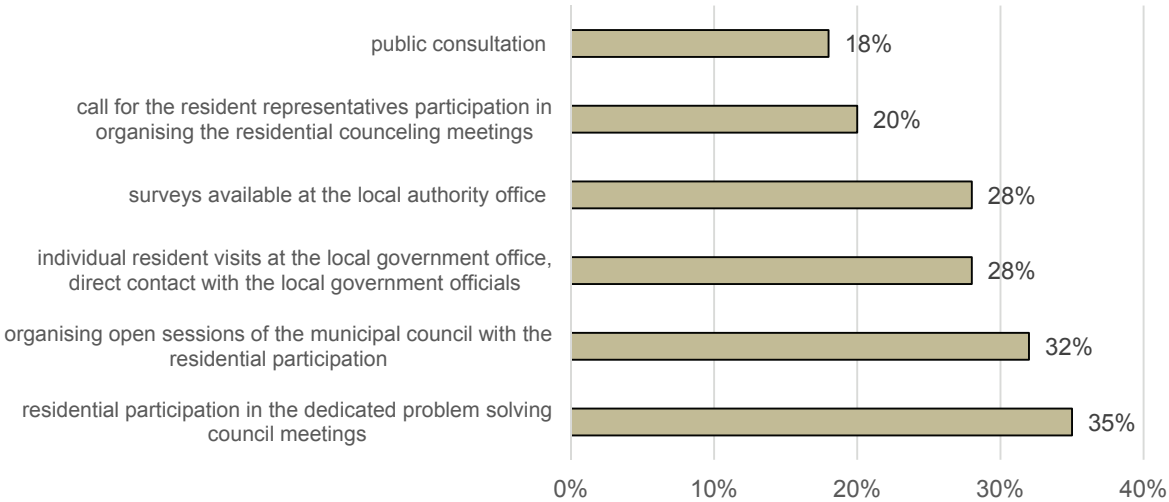


Source: own pilot research

Figure 2 presents the methods of communication aimed at obtaining the opinion of the citizens, as noted by the respondents. Residents can get involved in the actions of the local government by participating in the problem-solving meetings of various committees or in the open sessions of the municipal council. Respondents also acknowledged the opportunity to meet the representatives of the local authorities during councilmen office time. Unfortunately, 28% of the respondents did not observe any activities aimed at obtaining the inhabitants' opinions or views of the residents.

These results are similar to the opinion of the local authorities representatives obtained in the course of research conducted in 2010 as part of the system project "Diagnosing the capacity of local government, the elaboration on standards of competence and the assessment of local government offices training needs" (Konferencja MSWiA, 2010). Municipalities primarily use the direct meetings with the residents along with an e-mail contact. Duty hours of the councilors are also important, especially in the municipalities – as indicated by the 91% of respondents. Public opinion surveys in the form of questionnaires are used in about 50% of the municipalities (urban and rural municipalities), while only indicated by the 23% of respondents in rural communities. The offices frequently announce the information via local information boards, websites, or the Public Information Bulletin.

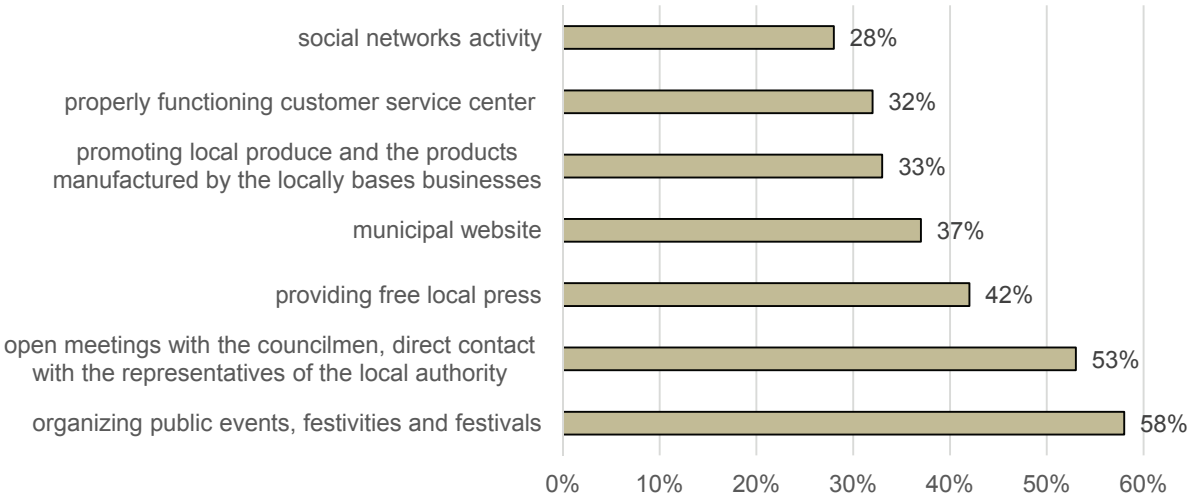
Figure 2: Noticed efforts to discover the opinion of the residents employed by the local council



Source: own pilot research

In a pilot study it was discussed which forms of communication should the office be using according to the residents - the results are presented in Figure 3. It turns out that the residents claim that a good ways to communicate with the local government offices are the public events, festivals and open meetings with the authorities and councilors, or the direct contact with the officials. Through various types of events municipalities can promote local produce and the products of the locally based entrepreneurs. An important source of communication is also a free of charge press - the local newspaper containing all the current information, as well as the systematically updated municipality website. Residents also highlight the role of the customer service center, particularly important for the urban municipalities. In those municipalities, the social networking plays an essential communicative role.

Figure 3: The most common form of communication that should be used by the office in order to reach the residents



Source: own pilot research

It needs to be noted that the information provided by the local government office must be reliable and accurate. Even if this information is not highly favorable for the local administration, it should be publicized, as concealing the facts or omitting certain difficult and unpopular issues often leads to the loss of credibility in the eyes of the residents. The citizens should be regularly informed about the actions taken by their municipality, since such communication in the long run brings more benefits, including gaining public trust, which is one of the most important goals.

Despite the local government's awareness of its menial role to residents, the activities applied to preserve the fluent communication with the residents are rather reactive and are based on current information transfer. It's hard to even speak of a proper dialogue with the local communities. Barely few communicative tools based on the initiative, creativity and openness of local authorities are used in this process. Relatively few local government offices use public opinion polls and public consultations as a form of communication. A positive phenomenon is the increased use of the Internet as a channel of communication; not just a municipal website, but also social media, even if their potential is not yet fully utilized to study the needs and obtaining information from the local residents.

6. CONCLUSIONS

To ensure good communication of the local government office with the residents, the managers must recognize the expectations and preferences of the residents, remain in close relations with them, show interest in their opinions, suggestions and complaints. To achieve this agreement, various forms of communication are involved, through more passive, designed primarily to provide information about certain events, to more active, encouraging the residents themselves to undertake and participate in multiple initiatives. This is particularly relevant in terms of the new management concepts. Currently, residents want to participate in the life of their community, have an influence on the decisions taken by the authorities, therefore they need a reliable communication channels. One should be aware that the local government offices use rather mixed management concepts, combining the varying degrees of administrative management with the executive management as well as social participation. The main purpose of the local government must be meeting the social needs and improving the managerial efficiency. However, it is the communication that is essential, since it determines whether a synergistic effect of the initiatives can be reached and it prevents the inefficient use of public resources.

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