



# COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

# SUMMARY

The Communications Strategy was created using data collected from:

- Community Survey on Engage Muskoka Lakes;
- Community Interviews with Council, Staff, Lake Associations, and Rate Payer Groups; and
- Best Practice Reviews and Discussions with Comparator Municipalities.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Strong external communications leads to an engaged, informed community.
- Media Relations is a priority, relationships with local media outlets are imperative in disseminating messages to the community.
- Based on trends, to find information, the community looks to:
  - Social Media (Facebook and Twitter);
  - Website ([www.muskokalakes.ca](http://www.muskokalakes.ca));
  - Engage Muskoka Lakes; and the
  - Mayor's Letter.
- Strong internal communications leads to engaged and informed Council and staff.
- Emergency communication planning is crucial.

# INTRODUCTION

The Communications Strategy was developed based on extensive input.

The strategy sets clear direction to build on the existing foundation to provide timely accurate information to an engaged Council, staff and community.

The strategy includes a definitive vision and goals to provide timely information to the community with both traditional and online communications channels.





# Vision

**A communications program that has a strong foundation and the trust of an informed and engaged community by sharing accurate and timely messages.**

# VALUES

- Accurate and Transparent
- Proactive and Positive
- Collaborative and Consistent
- Accessible and Clear
- Citizen Focused and Engaging

# AUDIENCE

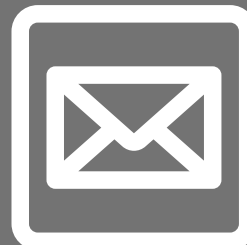
- Council
- Staff
- Community
  - Permanent Residents
  - Second Home Residents
  - Businesses
  - Visitors
- Associations/Rate Payer Groups
- Media



# GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

# GOALS AND OBJECTIVES SUMMARY

- Strong Internal Communications
- Improve Online Presence
- Develop a Consistent Approach to Engagement
- Formalize Brand Identity
- Execute Planned, Proactive Communications
- Embrace Partnerships
- Utilize Plain Language
- Encourage In-Person Interactions



# STRONG INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

## Areas of Focus

- Promote a culture of understanding that communication is key to the municipality's relationship with the community, and continued growth and success.
- Ensure communication is a critical component of program and service delivery.

## Priority Actions

1. Information dissemination from SLT to respective departments, this could be done through regular departmental staff meetings and/or an internal newsletter.
2. Regular proactive council and staff updates from the Communications Advisor or the CAO.
3. Develop a communications framework/guide that will evaluate matters to determine the best course of action.
4. Establish a plan for better use of the Township's intranet - The Dock.
5. Share Council highlights with staff following Council meetings each month.
6. Develop a Media Inquiry Policy/Procedure/Media Strategy to ensure consistency of outgoing messaging.
7. Bi-annual or quarterly departmental meetings with communications. These meetings will establish:
  - a) Goals/objectives
  - b) Audiences (internal/external)
  - c) Tactics: Electronic and print (what resource to use and what additional requirements will be necessary); include events, public relations planning, social media, etc.
  - d) Budget/resources
  - e) Measurement (for future evaluation and determining required/sufficient resources)



# IMPROVE ONLINE PRESENCE

## (Internal and External)

### Areas of Focus

- Connecting with stakeholders online is the most efficient and effective means for reaching the largest and most engaged audience.
- It is anticipated that the digital world will continue to grow. In order to stay on top of this, the Township will need to work towards a more consistent, approachable online body.

### Priority Actions

1. Review and edit all website content on [www.muskokalak.es.ca](http://www.muskokalak.es.ca).
2. Monitor website analytics to gain insight and plan for the future.
3. Develop a new user-friendly website.
4. Review and redevelop a social media policy.
5. Work towards two-way communication taking place on social media.
6. Begin collecting email addresses of stakeholders in order to develop an e-newsletter program.
7. Develop a mobile app that could be seen as a hub for all Township information.



# CONSISTENT APPROACH TO ENGAGEMENT

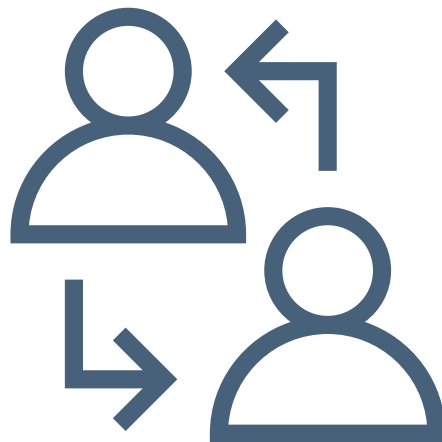
## (Internal and External)

### Areas of Focus

- Community engagement was an important aspect to all those who provided feedback through the process. Similar to the work needed to improve the Municipality's online presence, work needs to be done in order to more efficiently and effectively engage with the community in a variety of ways.

### Priority Actions

1. Strategize how to better utilize Engage Muskoka Lakes.
2. Develop internal guidelines to ensure a consistent approach to engagement.
3. Seek more opportunities for in-person engagement.
4. Engage our youth both online and in schools (high school and elementary).
5. Include a follow up with engagement guidelines to ensure the community understands how their feedback has been used.



# FORMALIZE BRAND IDENTITY

## (Internal and External)

### Areas of Focus

- There are currently a number of corporate templates including different letterhead, media release and report templates, as well as different logos and colour schemes. These templates should be expanded and streamlined to create a more consistent brand identity. These templates will ensure consistency and help with recognition of material coming from the Township.

### Priority Actions

1. Develop a logo policy and logo use guidelines for internal use - staff and consultants.
2. Develop design templates for print and online materials.
3. Develop brand guidelines for colour use, etc.



# PLANNED PROACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

(Internal and External)

## Areas of Focus

- Ensure communications are a critical component of program and service delivery.
- Embed communications into the culture of the organization, and encourage all staff to be thinking about communication early on when managing projects.
- Proactively share and engage with residents on TML stories that recognize and celebrate Township successes and foster a greater sense of community.

## Priority Actions

1. Develop an annual communications calendar, to establish a framework of key campaigns for the year.
2. Regular touchpoints between the Communications Advisor and SLT/departments to foster a greater understanding of projects, and upcoming events, etc. This will give the opportunity for the Communications Advisor to identify potential issues, threats or engagement opportunities more readily than managers whose focus is elsewhere.
3. Identify overlap, and make recommendations on the best timing for all department's communication goals with an eye on clarity, efficiency and opportunity.
4. Ensure the Mayor and Council are well-informed, and easily able to access succinct messaging as well as detailed information to ensure they can appropriately serve their role as liaisons to the community.

# EMBRACE PARTNERSHIPS

## (Internal and External)

### Areas of Focus

- The Township is fortunate to have a number of lake associations, rate payer groups, community hall boards and businesses who are well-positioned to share information with their stakeholders.
- During consultations, it was learned that one of the hardest to reach audiences is both second home residents and visitors alike. Using these partners to connect the Township with this hard-to-reach audience as a trusted channel will be of great benefit to both parties.

### Priority Actions

1. Make community partner outreach a key component of communications to increase collaborative opportunities that will ensure more robust, comprehensive engagement.
2. Develop a Media Policy/Strategy to ensure consistency and engage media outlets to work collaboratively.



# UTILIZE PLAIN LANGUAGE

## (Internal and External)

### Areas of Focus

- When communicating with the public, mindfulness around government jargon, and limiting its use will help to form a personal connection with our community, while also supporting the retention of information.
- Daunting material reduces the likelihood of recipients reading a communication. Plain language will help to reach a greater audience while also increasing overall accessibility.

### Priority Actions

1. Share summaries/monthly updates on social media or in an e-newsletter fashion following council meetings.
2. Utilize more photos/infographics when sharing important messages.
3. Reduce copy heavy messages on social media - create more digestible content.
4. Utilize a friendly tone when drafting media releases, website updates, social media posts, etc.
5. Utilize AODA Guidelines to ensure communication materials are accessible for all.



# ENCOURAGE IN-PERSON INTERACTIONS

## (Internal and External)

### Areas of Focus

- In-person interactions are a great way to build both internal (staff and council) and external (community) relationships.

### Priority Actions

1. Host in-person town halls for both staff and the community.
2. Attend Farmers Markets to connect with those at the market, and share relevant information.
3. Seek more opportunities for in-person engagement through event attendance, youth engagement at schools, etc.





# ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES



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To be successful, everyone on the Township team is responsible for supporting effective communications including the Strategic Leadership Team, departments, staff and Council:

## Communications Advisor

- Prepare and issue media releases to the local media; provide quotes, answer additional questions, and provide additional information upon request.
- Provide support and direction to the Mayor and CAO, and other Directors and departments for the development and distribution of communications and marketing material.
- Make recommendation for training as needed (i.e. media training).
- Lead the management and promotion of the Engage Muskoka Lakes to receive public input of projects; train leaders and internal liaisons on how to optimize use of the platform.
- Responsible for the overall effectiveness of the website; ensure regular updates, maintenance and enhancements are completed, reviewing internal submissions for message clarity and tone.
- Oversee the social media program; monitor outlets and respond to comments, ensure the most effective tools and channels are used to distribute content.
- Act as subject matter expert and provide input and guidance to critical internal communications.
- Regularly communicate directly with the public through community groups and associations and other channels to maintain positive relationships and ensure strong engagement. Respond to public inquiries regarding initiatives and activities.
- Organize in-person engagement opportunities.
- Develop guidelines, policies, and frameworks related to communications.

## Departments

- Complete minor website updates.
- Seek support from Communications Advisor on promotional material and project communications
- Bi-annual or quarterly meetings with Communications to establish annual projects and discuss communications needs.
- Deliver on media requests as required.
- Provide content and information for media releases, and advertising material.

## Strategic Leadership Team

- Disseminate information from SLT and Council to staff via regular meetings.
- Support staff to ensure a positive relationship amongst departments and communications exists.
- Supporting a culture where communication is a priority.
- Create avenues for staff to enhance both internal and external communications.

## Council

- Receive information from both staff and the public, and seek clarification where necessary.
- Share relevant information with constituents. Council is seen as the frontline channel to the public and are trusted and sought sources of information.
- Act in a positive, respectful manner to ensure messages are being effectively received by both staff and the public.
- Direct specific and/or operational questions and concerns from the public to the CAO or appropriate Director.

## Mayor

- Act as the spokesperson for the municipality.
- Works with the Communications Advisor to determine the best course of information delivery in a political situation and/or acts as CEO for the municipality.



# **IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE**

# PRIORITY ACTION TIMELINE

**2024**

**Q1 + Q2  
2025**

**Q3 + Q4  
2025**

**2026**

- Communications Framework
- Intranet Plan
- Departmental Meetings
- E-Newsletter
- Internal Engagement Guidelines
- Logo Policy
- Communications Calendar

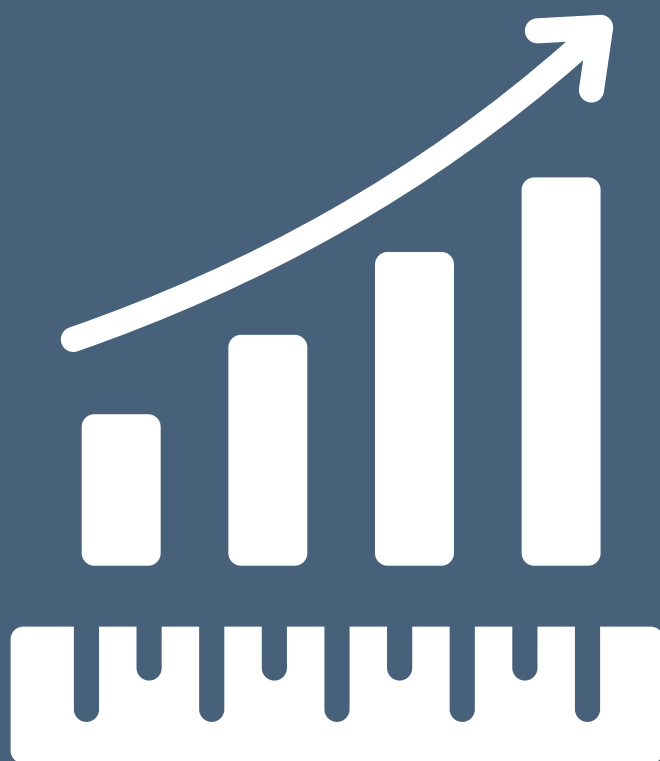
- Media Strategy
- Design Templates
- Brand Guidelines
- Event Attendance
- Town Halls
- Website Content Review

- New Website

- Mobile App

## ONGOING

- Information dissemination from SLT to respective departments, this could be done through regular departmental staff meetings and/or an internal newsletter.
- Regular proactive council and staff updates from the Communications Advisor or the CAO.
- Share Council highlights with staff following Council meetings each month.
- Bi-annual or quarterly departmental meetings with communications.
- Monitor website analytics to gain insight and plan for the future.
- Work towards two-way communication taking place on social media.
- Strategize how to better utilize Engage Muskoka Lakes.
- Develop internal guidelines to ensure a consistent approach to engagement.
- Seek more opportunities for in-person engagement.
- Engage our youth both online and in schools (high School and elementary).
- Include a follow up with the engagement guidelines to ensure the community understands how their feedback has been used.
- Develop an annual communications calendar, to establish a framework of key campaigns for the year.
- Regular touchpoints between the Communications Advisor and SLT/departments.
- Ensure the Mayor and Council are well-informed.
- Make community partner outreach a key component of communications.
- Share summaries/monthly updates on social media or in an e-newsletter fashion following council meetings.
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- Reduce copy heavy messages on social media - create more digestible content.
- Utilize a friendly tone when drafting media releases, website updates, social media posts, etc.



# MEASURING SUCCESS

**Evaluation and measurement play a key role in successful implementation of a strategic communications plan.**

### **What does success look like?**

- Enhanced Engagement - Increase in Public Feedback on Township Initiatives
- Staff and Council Satisfaction - Greater Engagement and Awareness
- Website and Social Media Traffic - Gather and Review Website and Social Media Analytics
- Implementation of All Noted Tactics
- Annual Communications Report





# APPENDICES

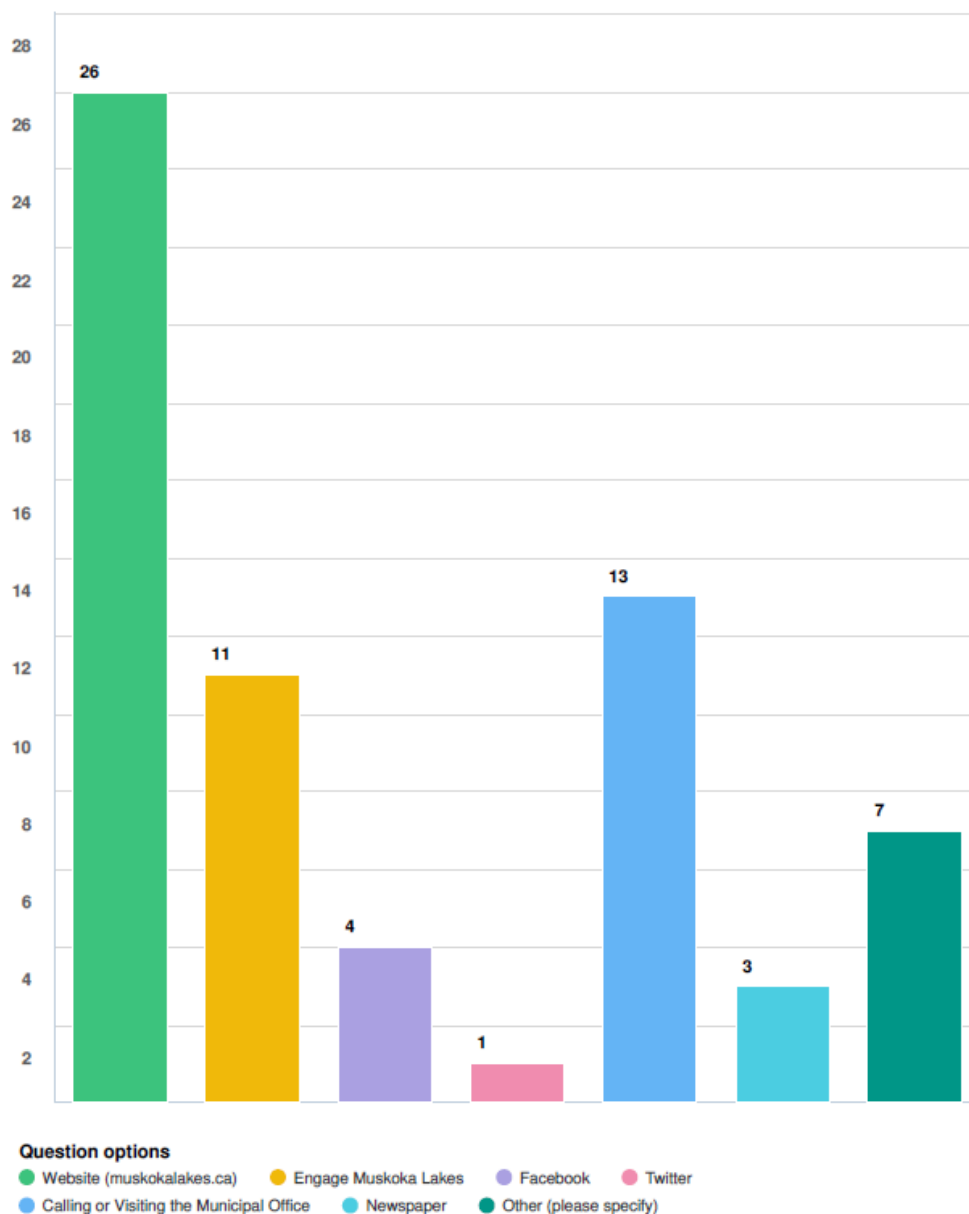
# COMMUNITY SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

- Which of the following would describe your residency in Muskoka Lakes?
- Which age group do you fall into?
- If you are looking for Township information, what are the top sources you would utilize?
- Based on your answer to question 3, how would you rate your experience with each of the following sources (if applicable)? 1 being very poor and 5 being excellent.
  - Website ([www.muskokalakes.ca](http://www.muskokalakes.ca))
  - Engage Muskoka Lakes
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
  - Calling or Visiting the Municipal Office
  - Newspaper
- Through this process, we are trying to determine the best ways to reach our community. How would you like to receive information from the Township?
- How interested are you in receiving information about the following topics from the Township?
  - Annual Municipal Budget
  - By-Laws and By-Law Enforcement
  - Community Events
  - Council Meetings - Agendas and Minutes
  - Economic Development News and Initiatives
  - Emergency Preparedness
  - Fire Service
  - Municipal Elections
  - Muskoka Lakes Public Library
  - Parks and Trails
  - Planning and Development
  - Recreation Programs
  - Roads (Including Snow Removal, Etc.)
  - Service Disruptions
  - Property Taxes

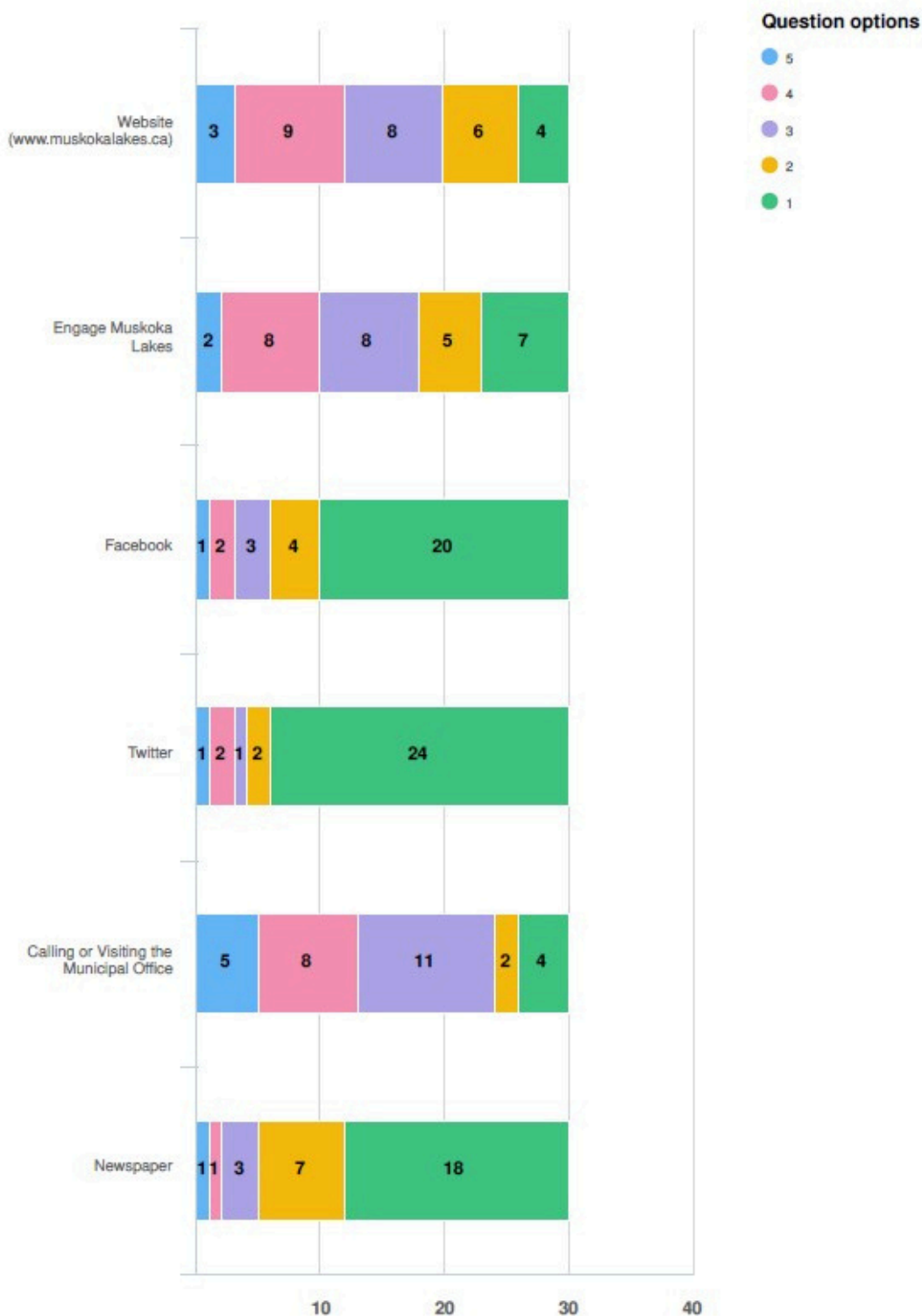


- Please let us know if there are any other topics you would like to receive regular updates on.
- if the Township is seeking public feedback on a specific issue, how would you be most likely to participate?
- Please let us know if you have any thoughts or considerations related to communications, or the development of a communications strategy.

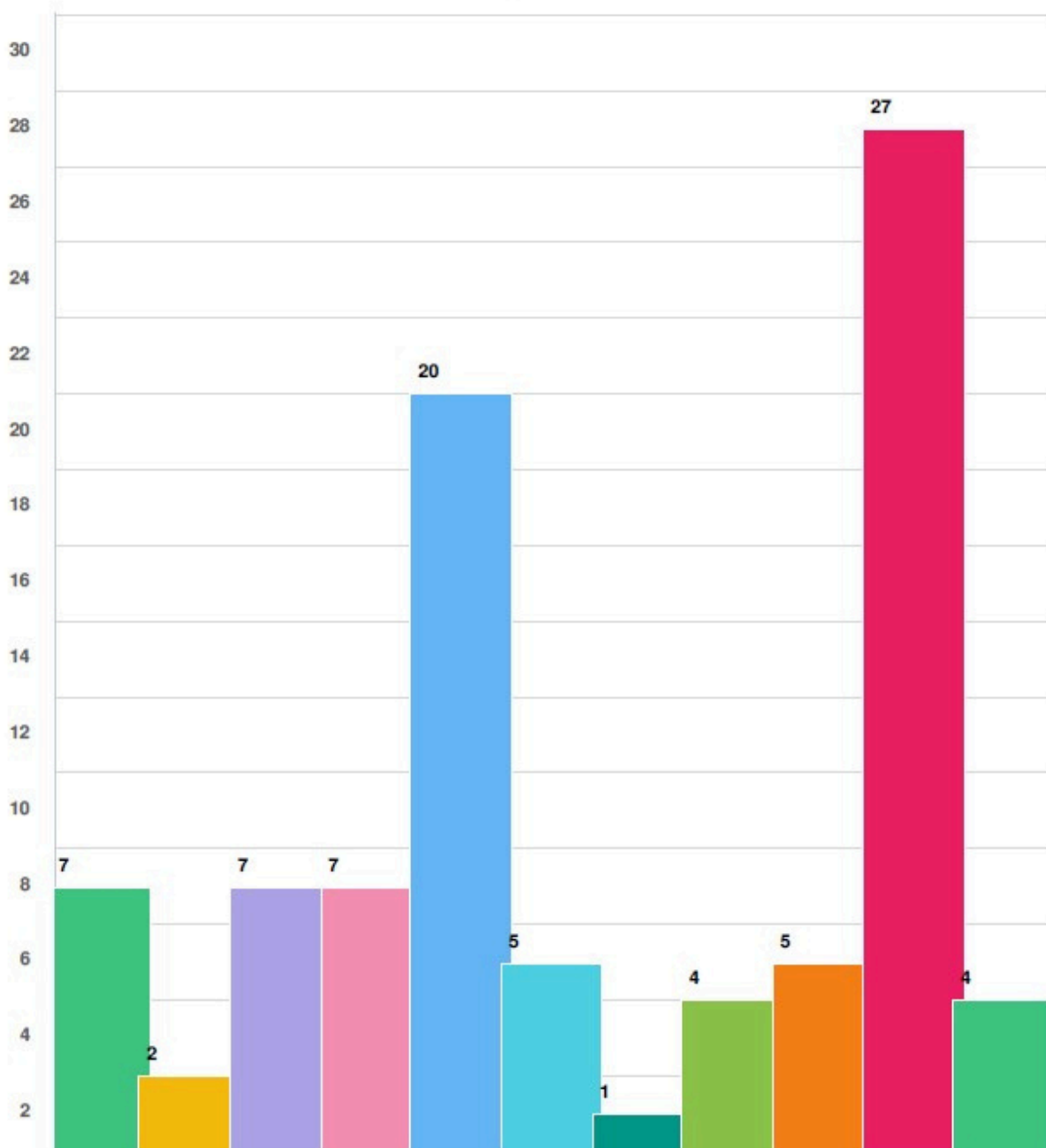
**If you are looking for Township information, what are the top sources you would utilize? Check all that apply.**



Based on your answer to question 3, how would you rate your experience with each of the following sources (if applicable)? 1 being very poor and 5 being excellent.



Through this process, we are trying to determine the best ways to reach our community. How would you like to receive information from the Township? Check all that apply.



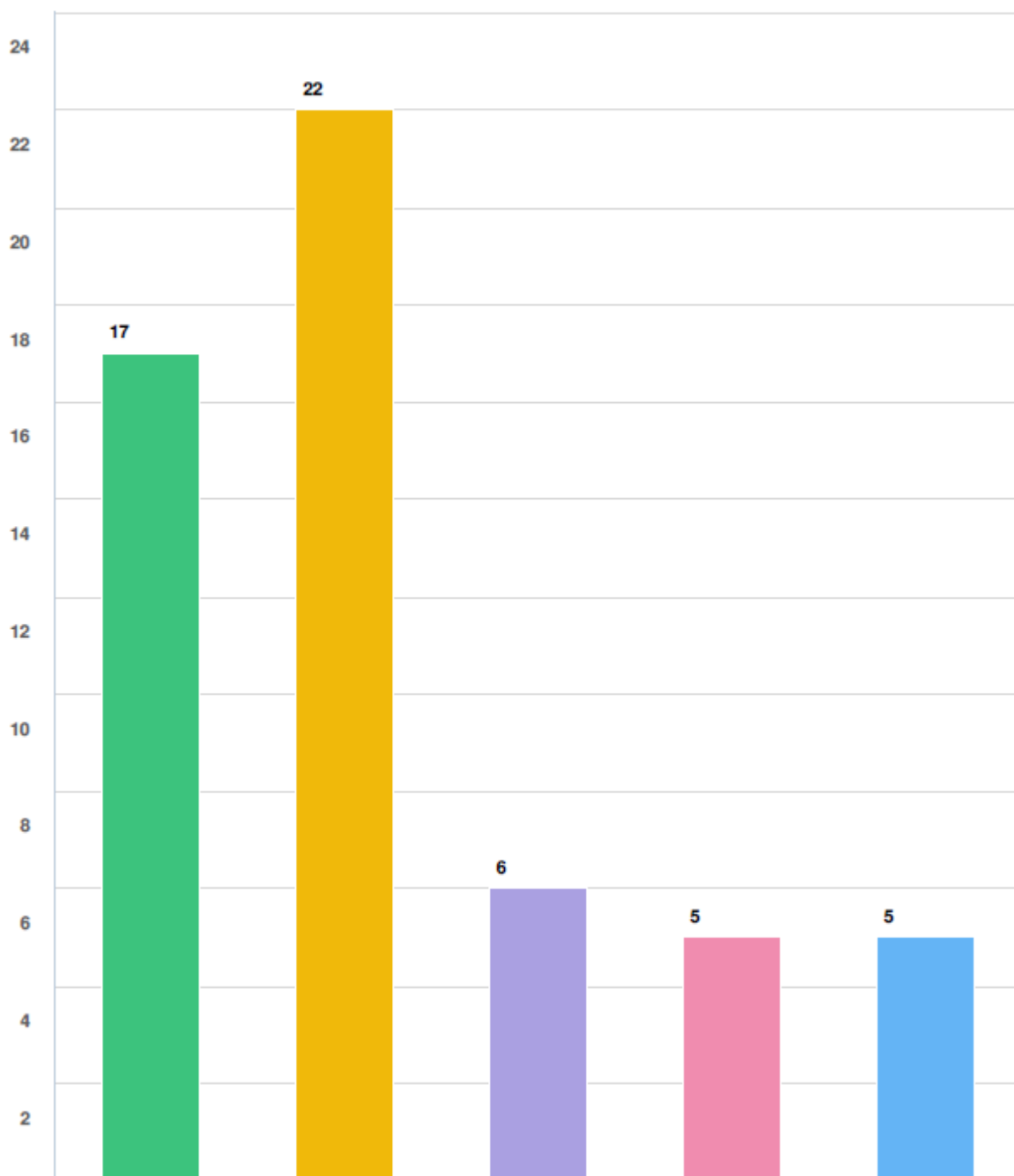
**Question options**

- Other (Please Specify Where)
 ● Email (Weekly or Monthly Newsletter)
 ● Mobile Application
 ● Newspaper
- Radio
 ● Print Material (i.e. Brochures, Posters, etc.)
 ● Website (muskokalakes.ca)
 ● Text Message
- Instagram
 ● Twitter
 ● Facebook

**How interested are you in receiving information about the following topics from the Township? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not interested, and 5 being very interested.**



If the Township is seeking public feedback on a specific issue, how would you be most likely to participate?



**Question options**

Other (please specify) Telephone In-Person Direct Email Engage Muskoka Lakes (Online Survey)

# BEST PRACTICE REVIEW

- What is your department's structure? (reporting, staff)
- What are your department's responsibilities (website, social, Council, EcDev, graphic design, releases)?
- How do you determine your communication priorities?
- Where do you focus your greatest resources/energy and why?
- Are there strategies/tactics you've put in place that have yielded impressive results?
- Is there a particular area or issue that your team struggles with?
- How are internal communications handled (especially with off-site staff)?
- WHERE RELEVANT: How do you reach cottage/seasonal residents?

## **Municipal Communicators** **Springwater, Centre Wellington, Lake of Bays, Clearview**

### **Key Takeaways**

- 3 out of 4 report directly to CAO
- Springwater does a direct mail newsletter every month that is working well
- All municipalities host internal Townhall meetings for staff. CAO provides updates, HR provides some sort of wellness update, breakfast, or snacks after work. Often 2 sessions, one for office staff, one at PW yards.
- Monthly memo to Council with media stats – i.e. how many social media posts, media releases, etc.
- IT or website coordinator does website
- Video updates seem to be well received, but video production takes a significant amount of time

# COUNCIL/SLT INTERVIEWS

- In your opinion, what is the role of communications at the Township? And what does effective communications look like to you?
- What do you believe are the critical information/themes the Township should be communicating?
- Do you feel the Township currently does an effective job of internal communications? How do you feel this could be improved?
- In your opinion, which Township communications are currently the most useful for stakeholders? Which aren't as effective? (i.e., Engage Muskoka Lakes website, posters, newspaper ads, direct emails, etc.)
- If you do not read Township communications on a frequent basis, what would have encouraged you to do so?
- \*What are the communication requirements for your department?
- \*What is the biggest thing you are hearing from your constituents as it relates to communications?
- If there was one thing, we could begin doing tomorrow to improve communications, what would that be? And why?

## Key Takeaways

### Internal

- Monthly internal newsletter following council
- Distribute media releases to all staff
- Monthly departmental staff meetings
- Flowchart for how information should be released to the community

### External

- Collect email addresses to develop a monthly or quarterly newsletter
- Share 'coles notes' of by-laws
- Advertise community centres/recreation activities/parks and trails, etc.
- Share information on the building permit process (through cloudpermit?)
- Instagram
- Re-organization of township website (more user-friendly)
- Re-organization of government portal (easier to locate agendas, etc.)
- Phones at Municipal Office being answered – avoid using the phone system
- Direct text messages to ratepayers
- Share visually appealing social media posts
- 24/7 By-Law
- Council Corner on website with summary of monthly decisions,

# STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

- What do you believe are the critical information/themes the Township should be communicating?
- Is this happening effectively? Why/why not?
- Are you a full time Muskoka Lakes resident? If yes, where do you tend to see/hear/read about Township information, news and events? Are you a part time Muskoka Lakes resident? If yes, where did you tend to see/hear/read about Township information, news and events?
- In your opinion, which Township communications are currently the most useful for stakeholders? Which aren't as effective? (i.e., Engage Muskoka Lakes website, posters, newspaper ads, direct emails, etc.)
- Who do you believe are the hardest to reach audiences? How can we reach them?
- If there was one thing, we could begin doing tomorrow to improve communications, what would that be? And why?

## Key Takeaways

- The hardest audience to reach is seasonal residents who aren't members of any associations
- Monthly or quarterly e-newsletter
- Advertise Engage Muskoka Lakes to further educate on relevant matters
- Share information about building regulations
- Contact residents and visitors through short term rentals, marinas and traditional accommodations
- Run a campaign to direct people to website
- Contact stakeholders directly, i.e. through email address and text message – response is higher when emails are coming from a real person. At this time, the only direct communication from the township to the ratepayer is the mayors letter
- Explore opportunities to communicate with the Indigenous community
- Opportunity to utilize mayors letter to have people respond with email addresses