2024 Strategic Communications Plan

Prepared by Truscott Rossman

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The Landscape

Effective Communications: A Strategic Priority

In its 2019 strategic plan, Kent County identified *Effective Communications* as one of five strategic priorities, noting a commitment to be transparent and clear in the communications and decisions of the County.

The 2019 plan acknowledges the need to increase dialogue with residents on how Kent County can be a partner in improving lives and communities. It also identifies development of a strategic communications plan as a tool that will help facilitate this dialogue.

The Commitment:

"We want to create two-way interactions with residents and government/leadership, including with the Board of Commissioners, and will be seeking ways to create opportunities to gather input and participation from residents. Through a new strategic communication plan, changes to the County's website, and more engagement tools for County leaders, we are working to deliver more timely and engaging information to those we serve."

Your Partner, Your Place

As the foundation for improved communications and a precursor to the strategic communications plan, Kent County undertook a rebranding initiative to better align its brand communications with its vision, mission and the work it does in and for the communities it serves. That initiative concluded with the launch of a new brand in January 2023.

The new brand tagline—Your Partner, Your Place—also serves as an abbreviated vision statement. Kent County is partnering to build a welcoming place, a thriving community and a better future for everyone who calls Kent County home.

Effective communication is a key priority in pursuit of this vision.

Challenges we see include:

- Not only increasing but sustaining awareness, understanding and utilization of the full breadth of vital programs and services that Kent County provides.

- Reaching and engaging more diverse audiences such as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) residents, those whose first language is not English, Generation Z and highly skilled talent from inside and outside the region.

- Reaching and engaging residents and community leaders in all corners of the county.

- Continuing to elevate Kent County's position as a ready and capable partner in transformative regional initiatives.

- Executing timely and innovative communications tactics that include, but go beyond, already successful newsletters and earned media.

- Ensuring better, more continuous tracking of public sentiment.

As media newsrooms, digital landscapes and the ways people consume information rapidly change, the County needs to leverage innovative tactics to stay on the forefront of these shifts. It must take on new endeavors to best reach a widely diverse audience. And it should continually seek public input and sentiment from residents to track progress and identify gaps.

Path of Progress

Grounded in research, this multi-platform communications plan outlines a fully integrated strategy and tactical plan to guide Kent County's day-to-day communications efforts and longer-term communications strategies. It is designed to empower County leaders and team members to effectively tell the County's story, foster collaborative relationships and provide vital information to the diverse constituency you serve and the partners who are integral to your work.

Goals

Organizational Goals

- Increase understanding and utilization of Kent County services, programs and initiatives among a growing and increasingly diverse population.

- Elevate Kent County's position as an innovative and vital partner in key community initiatives.

- Sustain Kent County's position as one of the fastest-growing counties in the state.

- Establish Kent County as an employer of choice.

- Continue to attract a younger and more diverse population and a highly skilled and educated workforce to the county and, specifically, to the Kent County workforce.

Communications Goals: Elevate the Brand and Cultivate Connections

Communications Goals

Elevate the Brand

- Elevate awareness of the full breadth of Kent County services and knowledge of how to access those services.

- Enhance awareness and understanding of the County's significant initiatives through regular, ongoing communications and two-way dialogue.

- Reach audiences outside the region with messages that attract visitors, talent, partnerships and investment.

Cultivate Connections

- Enhance connections between County Commissioners, administrative and department leadership and the people they serve.

- Continue to build positive and fruitful relationships with community stakeholders and partners.

- More effectively reach and engage younger and more diverse audiences, particularly new Americans and those for whom English is a second language.

- Build trust between the County and the community.

Research

Internal Research

BOC 2022 Strategic Planning Session

When the Board of Commissioners met to discuss priorities for a 2022-2023 update to the Kent County Strategic Plan, they identified dozens of strategic and tactical ideas for improving communications. The ideas fell, loosely, into five categories:

- Board and community-based meetings

- Constituent relations

- Website improvements

- Digital communication strategies

- Internal board communications

Some common themes that emerged from this strategic and tactical brainstorming session included:

- Create opportunities for members of the Board of Commissioners to connect directly with and learn from constituents and vice versa.

- Create more opportunities for members of the Board of Commissioners and the public to learn about Kent County department programs, services and initiatives.

- Meet and communicate with constituents "where they are."

- Improve website navigation and make vital and timely information more accessible.

- Create more compelling digital content, including use of more short videos, compelling graphics and photos.

BOC 2023 Member Survey

As part of the research process for this communications plan, we conducted a follow up survey with members of the Board of Commissioners to further explore their communications priorities.

Constituent relations were far and away the top priority identified by Board of Commission members in this survey.

Specifically, members expressed strong support for initiating a monthly Kent County Board of Commissioners newsletter—which, in fact, was launched in 2023. They also noted the need for commissioners to build stronger connections with their constituents and to be more engaged in their communities, with a majority voicing support for hosting community meetings or forums in locations across the county.

Finally, underscoring recommendations made in the 2022 brainstorming sessions, BOC members noted the need to improve website navigation. Several also noted the need to create more compelling digital content, specifically video content, and to assess and possibly expand the social platforms the County uses to reach younger residents on the platforms they are likely to use.

2023 County Leadership and Department Interviews

To get a better picture of current County communications practices, strengths, gaps and opportunities, we conducted in-person and video conference interviews with the Chair of the Board of Commissioners, the Kent County Administrator, and leaders and team members from eight public-facing County departments.

Insights from these interviews follow.

WHAT THE COUNTY DOES WELL

The County has consolidated communications functions within the administrative office over the past few years and has committed resources to build a small team, bringing cadence, consistency, coordination and control to this important function of government.

External Communications

This has allowed the administration to build strong relationships with the local media and create a steady drumbeat of media coverage and engagement. As one department leader put it, "the County's posture is more proactive. We're now going to [the media] and saying, here's a story that you need to tell instead of waiting for them to come to us."

> *"The County's posture is more proactive."*

The expanded communications team has also improved frequency, quality, consistency and engagement on primary County social media pages. However, department leaders and team members noted there is still room for improvement, both on the primary pages and on the handful of department pages where page management remains dispersed. See related recommendations in the *Strategies* and the *Tactics & Tools* sections, below.

The human resources team valued recent communications team support for their talent attraction campaign and looks forward to building on this partnership to support future marketing and communications efforts.

Some leadership team members called attention to the quadrant meetings hosted by the County Administrator for local elected officials in and near their home communities. These are viewed as highly successful models for how County leadership can reach deep into communities across the county, cultivate relationships and encourage direct, two-way communication and countywide partnerships.

Department leaders also appreciated that the communications team has kept a sharp eye toward managing any political tensions that may arise without allowing the administrative office to be drawn in publicly.

Finally, the *Administrator's Digest* was universally cited both for its valuable content and reach to over 10,000 Kent County residents. Team members believe that, over the long-term, this tool will help build awareness and understanding of the broad spectrum of County services and initiatives.

Internal Communications

Leaders and team members expressed similar appreciation for vastly improved *internal* communications over the past two years.

Team members cited both the *Administrator's Digest* and the bi-monthly internal *County Communicator* newsletter as go-to sources of information about what is happening throughout the County organization and among County stakeholders and partners.

The first-ever employee engagement survey, conducted in June of 2023, was cited as a valuable tool for talent retention. Team members also found the "Lunch & Learns" with the County Administrator and the "Hot Seat" Q&A sessions at the Disney Way training with the Administrator, Deputy Administrators and HR Director extremely valuable, and would like to see these continued.

Team members noted that the County Administrator and communications team are adept at getting ahead of potential issues ensuring timely communication about upcoming matters, providing a heads up or seeking input.

> *"I'm better informed than I ever was about what's happening countywide. Al speaks openly and frankly about things to employees of all levels."*
>
> -Department Director

In summary, in nearly every department interview, leaders and team members noted a marked improvement in and prioritization of County communications over the past two years. These comments related both to internal and external communications.

AREAS TO STRENGTHEN

The areas department leaders and team members identified for improvement relate both to staffing and to function, and they span both internal and external communications.

Staffing

First, even though the administration has committed more resources to communications, department leaders acknowledge that the communications team is stretched thin and needs to grow. Given the scope of County services and the large and diverse audience it needs to reach, many of those interviewed believe the communications team is still under-resourced.

Gaps in Department-Level Communications

Several team members also noted that the administrative office communications is functioning well; however, information coming from the administration doesn't always flow effectively from department leaders to their teams leading to continued challenges and gaps in department-level communications.

Several noted the need for administration-level communications support at the department level, specifically assisting with social media to reach younger audiences and in building departmental connections within the community.

One department leader highlighted the importance of having a communications perspective in departmental meetings to identify communications opportunities. Similarly, the administration's communications team pointed to a need to regroup with department team members more often to get a better grasp on what's coming up in departments and identify communications opportunities.

In each of these discussions, department leaders expressed the importance of having communications professionals embedded in the various departments so they can be fully versed in the operations, programs and priorities.

Board Agenda Communications (Internal)

We heard complaints about a persistent lack of internal communications related to Board of Commissioners and committee meeting agendas and related requirements for department head presentations. This impacts the team in a couple ways.

Department leaders pointed to various instances when they were expected to present to the Board but had not been informed that their topic was on the agenda.

One also gave an example of a critical and timely item that was pulled from the Finance Committee agenda without their knowledge, so they had to scramble to get it added back.

Department leaders asked for a predictable communication tool that will provide consistent and timely board agenda information so they can best prepare for or plan to observe the meetings that are relevant to their service areas.

Finally, we learned that the role of Emergency Management is not well understood by other department personnel. By extension, this has led to a lack of understanding of where communications from Emergency Management should go, what communications platforms can be used and what other office and department communications overlap with those of Emergency Management. The Emergency Management team specifically noted that Everbridge, the County's mass notification system, is underutilized due to budget constraints. They suggested that, if the system were used to its fullest potential, the County could improve both internal and external emergency notifications and response.

Utilization of Digital Channels

While many praised recent improvements in Kent County's social media presence and performance—including higher and more consistent post frequency and engagement and stronger support for department-level pages—team members identified room for improvement in the County's storytelling approach, citing a need for more innovation and creativity in conveying messages effectively to various target audiences.

Some specifically noted a gap in fully leveraging tools like Studio Kent for video storytelling and adapting to the preferences of younger audiences on platforms such as Instagram.

Diversification of Language and Culture

We also heard a call to improve language diversification in signage, outreach and outgoing communication and to continue efforts to better reach the large population of college and university students in Kent County.

Echoing what we heard in external community interviews (cited below), team members acknowledged a need to build community partnerships and engage

trusted spokespersons and community leaders to effectively reach diverse communities throughout the county.

Mission-Driven Presence and Communications

While the administration and communications team were praised for their ability to stay focused on the mission and out of the political fray, we also heard calls for County elected leadership to remain steadfastly focused on a mission-driven presence in the community and, by extension, mission-driven communications.

It was noted that, sometimes, this requires providing services to or having a presence among individuals or groups who may not share beliefs or align politically with decision makers.

> *"We're not here to advance anyone's politics. We're here to deliver on our mission."*
>
> -Department Director

External Research

Local Unit of Government Survey and Interviews

SURVEY

We conducted a brief survey among leaders representing local units of government throughout Kent County and received 12 responses.

Nine of the 12, or 75%, rated overall effectiveness of Kent County communications good or excellent, with three rating it fair.

> 75% of LUG survey respondents rated Kent County communications good or excellent.

Electronic newsletters and quadrant meetings were rated the most effective communications channels with 10 of the 12 rating each as highly effective or effective.

Nine of 11 respondents rated direct interaction with County department directors and staff as highly effective or effective, while 8 of 11 respondents rated direct interaction with County elected officials as highly effective or effective.

INTERVIEWS

To gain deeper perspectives from leaders from various municipality types and sizes, we also spoke with leaders from Ada Township, the City of Grand Rapids and Sparta.

What the County Does Well

All municipal leaders interviewed praised Kent County's strong commitment to communications following Al Vanderberg's arrival. They noted marked improvement in the County's communications both with residents and with partners and other government leaders. They regularly read the Administrator's Digest and find it a valuable source of countywide news and information.

They pointed to an increased level of County engagement in the Grand Valley Metro Council and the Metro 6 regional managers meetings and praised the County-led quadrant meetings. Sparta and Ada Township leaders additionally noted that the administrative team has been a very helpful and accessible point of contact with the County.

> This multi-point engagement has proven to be an effective communications tool and has led to heightened trust, stronger relationships and more opportunities to collaborate with other local units of government.

While City of Grand Rapids interviewees believe the administration's communications team remains under resourced for the size, depth and breadth of County operations, noting that residents still don't clearly understand what the County does and how its offerings are distinct from those of the City, they also acknowledged that strategic investments in health department communications

during and following the pandemic, as well as additions to the administration and Department of Public Works communications teams have resulted in stronger and more effective communications around vital County services.

Areas to Strengthen

We found numerous consistencies across our interviews with municipal leaders. All strongly believe that the County has made measurable improvements in communication over the past two to 2.5 years.

However, as the largest municipality within the county and home to the County seat, Grand Rapids has a unique relationship with Kent County. Therefore, it is useful at this juncture to dive into insights specifically from that team about how communications between the entities and other municipalities could be strengthened.

First, they underscored a need for more coordinated planning between the City and the County and recommended formalizing conversations at the deputy level to close some of these gaps. They believe this will enhance understanding of priorities and facilitate collaboration on shared initiatives. They cited the example of the City's facilities master plan and the County's facilities plan.

> *"Currently, there's a lack of connection between the City and County on some big initiatives. It would be beneficial for deputy level leaders to discuss initiatives of mutual interest in advance to identify synergy on significant projects."*
>
> -City of Grand Rapids Representative

Second, they called for more coordinated *external* communications efforts between the City and County, particularly regarding shared projects and initiatives. They suggested that this effort could extend to other municipalities within the county.

Community-Based Organization Interviews

To better understand strengths and weaknesses in Kent County communications with important sectors of the community, we spoke with leaders from several

community-based organizations, including Frey Foundation, Hispanic Center of West Michigan, Kent County Disability Advocates, Kent County Essential Needs Task Force, Kent Intermediate School District, The Right Place, and the West Michigan Asian American Association. We attempted to schedule interviews with leaders representing the Black community in Kent County, but we were unable to coordinate calendars.

WHAT THE COUNTY DOES WELL

> The community leaders we spoke with noted a marked improvement in County communications over the past two years. They observed that the County is clearly prioritizing communications and has taken multiple steps to open new and expand existing lines of communications with various sectors of the community.

Several leaders mentioned that they have a very good working relationship with the county administrator, deputy administrators and others on the Kent County leadership team.

Commenting on a much-welcomed heightened level of communications with local units of government throughout the county, one interviewee stated, "Al, Jenny, Mark, Josh and Lori should be commended for getting out into the community. They are effectively reaching into the municipalities, effectively communicating and building relationships."

Community leaders noted that the County is working more as a partner in the community in recent years and that it is getting more engaged and taking a lead role in vital community issues, such as housing.

The *Administrator's Digest* was praised as a valuable communication tool for keeping the community informed and the County rebrand was called out as helping to foster a positive perception of Kent County.

Apart from this feedback on communications coming from the administration and the County as a whole, the West Michigan Asian American Association (WMAAA) specifically praised the Kent County Health Department's communications and collaborative community relations practices.

They pointed to a strong working relationship with the KCHD, emphasizing mutual learning and collaboration. For instance, KCHD is leveraging the WMAAA Navigator Program to assist new Americans in accessing health care benefits throughout Kent County, effectively closing service gaps. KCHD is also referring new Americans to the WMAAA Navigator Program and adopting its model to train internal navigators.

> *"They know we have the trust of the Latino community, and they let us lead rather than dictating the design of the partnership. They were receptive to our feedback. The relationship doesn't feel transactional. It's authentic. We're here for each other."*
>
> -HCWM Leader

The Hispanic Center of West Michigan also had high praise for Kent County Health Department's communications and community relations approach. When KCHD reached out during the pandemic, the Hispanic Center appreciated that the center was trusted to be the bridge between the health department and the Latino community. Like WMAAA, they cite the success of the Navigator Program.

The Hispanic Center also pointed to a beneficial change in the way KCHD conducted its last needs assessment. Instead of conducting it themselves, KCHD gave the nonprofits a stipend to do outreach *in multiple languages*. By calling on organizations that already enjoy the trust of their communities, the health department was able to gather a more representative assessment.

The Hispanic Center hopes the Navigator Program and their relationship with the health department can be a model for relationships throughout the County organization. In fact, they have begun to build a similar relationship with Kent County Community Action, connecting people to services.

Finally, the Hispanic Center views Kent County 2050 as a strong communication and engagement tool.

> *"Kent County 2050 is an example of how to include other organizations and people in the design of the future."*
>
> -HCWM Leader

AREAS TO STRENGTHEN

BIPOC Community Engagement

WMAAA leaders cite the KCHD Navigator Program partnership as a model for how the County and other departments could partner more extensively and meaningfully with the WMAAA and other entities representing BIPOC residents in Kent County.

While portions of the discussion with the WMAAA strayed into topics other than communications, they did point to ways that improved communications and community engagement could help address some challenging issues.

For instance, the group called for more direct investments in the West Michigan Asian American community, and they linked funding disparities, in part, to communications-related issues. As an example, they attributed inequitable funding allocations to the myth of the "model minority" and noted that Asian Americans are not represented in the decision-making process when County funding allocations are under consideration. For example, as CARES Act funding decisions were being made, Kent County worked with the Grand Rapids Chamber up front but did not bring in the WMAAA until late in the process.

More broadly, they pointed to a lack of Asian Americans at the County leadership level, noting that County leadership is not reflective of the diverse community it serves.

> Be present in the community and aim to build a leadership team more reflective of the diverse community you serve.

Be Present in the Community

The West Michigan Hispanic Center would like to see the County represented at more community events. They advised that the best way to reach the Latino community is face-to-face and noted that the Sheriff's Office is often present, but elected officials, the administration and County programs are not.

Dedicate Resources to Overcome Language Barriers

The West Michigan Hispanic Center agreed both that language and cultural barriers are a challenge in County communications and that community organizations are a natural place to turn for outreach and translation services. However, given the limited budgets and staffing of many of these organizations, the services need to come with resources attached to help fund people to do the work.

They pointed to the success of the Health Equity Council mini grants that allow community organizations to invest in the expansion of current programming and asked if this model could be replicated.

They also noted that not everything needs to be translated. In a less transactional relationship, like the Hispanic Center has with KCHD, the County could share information with community groups and allow those trusted voices to translate and share the most important information. Then, if the community needs answers, the organization can serve as the bridge between the community and the County.

Keep Stakeholders in the Loop

While many interviewees praised the County's heightened direct communications with local units of government, some asked that the County do a better job of keeping community stakeholders informed about relevant topics of discussion with LUGs. Where there are shared interests between the County, LUGs and an organization like The Right Place, for instance, they would find it valuable if County administrators would provide a heads up when they will be discussing these collaborative topics with municipal leaders.

Additionally, some noted cumbersome communications related to Board of Commissioners meeting agendas. Specifically, the recommendation is to include agenda topics directly in emails to community stakeholders, reducing the need for

recipients to click and search for information. They find it particularly frustrating when they receive emails that say, "An agenda has changed" without additional details, forcing the recipient to click and hunt for relevant information. This sentiment echoed what we heard from County staff.

Resident Surveys

WHAT WE LEARNED IN THE KENT COUNTY BRANDING PROCESS

In January 2023, prior to initiation of the County strategic communications planning process, Kent County launched its new brand. The branding process included extensive research that provides insight into the public's understanding of and sentiments about Kent County government.

Throughout the branding research and discovery process in mid to late 2021, interviewees and survey respondents told us that Kent County provides many vital, life-changing, even life-saving services that are not provided anywhere else. They also recognized that Kent County serves as an important link to partner agencies and other local units of government, providing complementary services throughout the community.

Despite this, residents rarely think of Kent County government. Instead, they think of Kent County as a *place* with distinct urban centers, abundant parks, countryside and farmland, orchards, rivers, lakes and access to amenities.

Even when people are familiar with Kent County services, they often don't associate those services with Kent County government or the Kent County brand.

Yet, a broad-reaching brand survey fielded in December 2021 found that a moderately high percentage of Kent County residents reported engaging with a Kent County department or office over the past five years.

The survey was sent to over 80,000 residents who are subscribed to Kent County email lists. The branding team also sent the survey to leaders in the African American, Asian American and Latinx communities and asked them to share it

with their networks. Additionally, the Essential Needs Task force included the survey information in its community-wide newsletter.

> Resident survey drew nearly 4,700 respondents and showed high level of engagement with County services.

The team received 4,669 responses. Respondents were provided a list of 15 County departments and offices with at least some public-facing services, plus the Board of Commissioners and were asked to select which they had interacted with over the past five years. The Health Department ranked number one with 55% of respondents reporting interaction, followed by Elections (47%), County Clerk (37%), Parks (29%) and Public Works (28%). See Table 1, below, for all engagement data.

Table 1: Engagement		
Rank	Dept, Office or Agency	% Who Interacted with the Entity in the Past 5 Years
1	Health	55% (2,590)
2	Elections	47% (2,207)
3	County Clerk	37% (1,728)
4	Parks	29% (1,373)
5	Public Works	28% (1,310)
6	Courts	24% (1,126)
7	Sheriff's Office	16% (755)
8 (tie)	Treasurer	10% (486)
8 (tie)	County Administration	10% (463)
9 (tie)	County Commissioner	8% (389)

9 (tie)	Kent MSU Extension	8% (363)
10 (tie)	Veteran's Services	5% (238)
10 (tie)	Drain Commissioner	5% (227)
11 (tie)	Community Action	4% (200)
11 (tie)	Prosecutor's Office	4% (183)
12	Purchasing	2% (84)

When asked, "Did you know that Kent County operates this range of departments, offices and services?" nearly 82% of respondents answered "yes." However, it is worth noting that the majority of survey recipients subscribe to Kent County email lists and, therefore, are likely to be better informed about County government.

Respondents were then asked, **"In your opinion, do these Kent County departments, offices and services make our community a better place to live and work?" More than 78% said "yes"** and fewer than 2% said "no," with 20% responding "neutral."

78% said "yes" when asked if Kent County departments, offices and services make our community a better place to live and work.

Finally, **respondents were asked to rank their experience** with the Kent County entities they engaged with on a 5-point scale from very poor to very good. All received strong favorable ratings, with **over 75% of respondents giving a "Good" or "Very Good" ranking to 13 of the 16 entities listed**. (See Table 2, below, for full list of positivity rankings.)

Table 2: Positivity		
Rank	**Dept, Office or Agency**	**% Who Ranked Good or Very Good**
1	Kent MSU Extension	94%
2 (tie)	Elections	91%
2 (tie)	Parks	91%
3	County Clerk	89%
4	Health Department	88%
5 (tie)	Purchasing	86%
5 (tie)	Treasurer	86%
6	Public Works	84%
7	Sheriff's Office	83%
8 (tie)	County Administration	81%

8 (tie)	Veteran's Services	81%
9	Community Action	77%
10	Courts	76%
11	County Commissioner	74%
12	Prosecutor's Office	72%
13	Drain Commissioner	68%

KENT COUNTY COMMUNITY SURVEY - FALL 2023 [Graphic note: include graphics from slides 27 - 31 of the survey]

A smaller but more recent online survey of Kent County residents, fielded in October - December 2023, included several questions specifically focused on communications.

> 63% of the nearly 1,600 respondents to online survey hear about County news and services via news media and 57% via social media

When asked about overall satisfaction with Kent County communications, 43% were satisfied, 45% neutral and 13% dissatisfied.

When asked how they would like Kent County government to communicate with them, 55% of respondents said they would like the County to communicate with them via news media, 51% in social media, 35% in e-newsletters, 30% mailers and 20% in community forums.

Earned Media Analysis

Note: The following statistics omit KCSO press releases and story coverage on vehicle crashes, crime and arrest reports, as well as story coverage that strictly refers to Kent County as a geographic location. We did not exclude Sheriff's Office announcements that focus on topics like new/updated programming, funding, corrections facility issues, other issues, or leadership.

County News Releases

Total Kent County news releases issued and posted online in 2023 (excluding topics listed above): 44

Some general release topics included:

- Affordable Housing Fund

- ARPA investments

- Board of Commissioners news

- Prosecutor major case announcements

- Facility expansions and park improvements

- Health Department alerts and services

- New hires

- Special programs/initiatives, i.e., Treasurer foreclosure prevention program

Earned Media Coverage

When analyzing Michigan-based broadcast and print/digital earned media stories mentioning Kent County in **last six months of 2023**, we found the following.
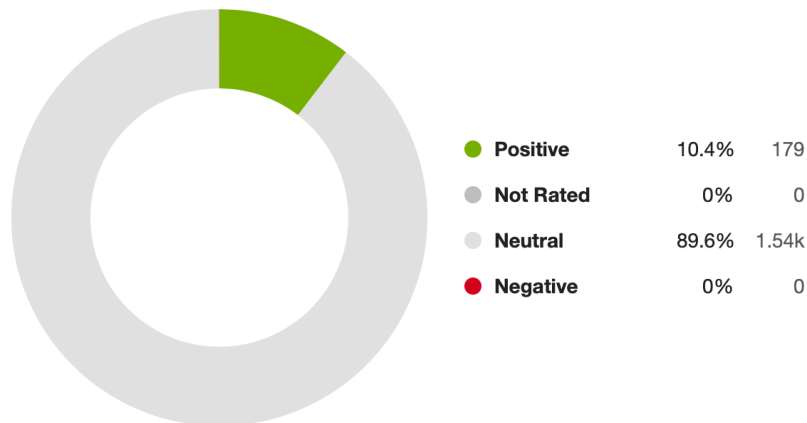
Total media story mentions: 1,710

Total stories each month:

- July: 210
- August: 291
- September: 256
- October: 294
- November: 380
- December: 283

Sentiment: (see note, below)

- Positive - 10.4% (174 stories)
- Neutral - 89.6% (1,540 stories)
- Negative - 0%

🟢	**Positive**	10.4%	179
⚪	**Not Rated**	0%	0
⚪	**Neutral**	89.6%	1.54k
🔴	**Negative**	0%	0

A NOTE ABOUT SENTIMENT

Truscott Rossman uses Meltwater for online media monitoring. The platform has the capability of analyzing "sentiment" of media coverage and assigning each story a rating of positive, negative or neutral.

Meltwater defines sentiment as *a view of or attitude toward a situation or event*.
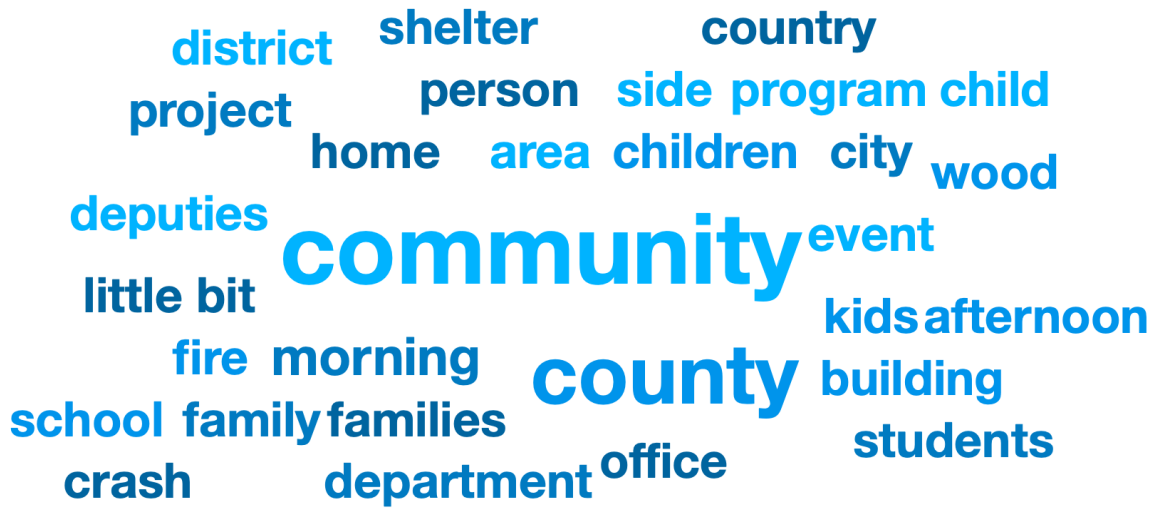
According to Meltwater, sentiment analysis analyzes a body of text to determine its opinion. The opinion is then labeled either more Positive or more Negative. This is called polarity.

The overall sentiment is then determined to be Positive, Negative, or Neutral based on the total polarity score. If something is both positive and negative, but more positive, the polarity score would rank it as positive.

While it would be extraordinarily labor intensive to manually analyze 1,710 stories for sentiment, our team does scan sentiment labels looking for analysis that seems "off." We will then manually review the story to determine if we need to reassign the label. An example of this could be a story about storm damage and emergency response in a community. The story could be labeled "Negative" due to the general subject matter when, in fact, it positively reports on the emergency response.

Top keywords represented in stories mentioning Kent County:

district shelter country
project person side program child
home area children city wood
deputies community event
little bit kids afternoon
fire morning county building
school family families students
crash department office

Newsletter & Bulletin Inventory

In addition to official media releases, the County regularly distributes newsletters to external and internal audiences. An inventory of these newsletters and bulletins is listed in the following table. Also see evaluation on pp. 74-75.

Newsletter/ Bulletin	General Content	Internal/ External	Frequency	Subscribers*
Administrator's Digest	County and community news	Both	2x/month	8,000 - 10,000
Board of Commissioners Newsletter	Board actions, decisions and announcements	Primarily External	Monthly	400 (Note: launched in October 2023)
Health Department Newsletter	KCHD news and alerts; public health updates	Primarily External	Monthly	71,000
Animal Shelter Newsletter	Shelter news, adoptable animals, animal welfare tips, etc.	Primarily External	Quarterly	5,550 (Note: launched in February 2024)
Community Action Newsletter	KCCA news, program updates and alerts.	Primarily External	Quarterly	5,000 (Note: launched in October 2024)
The Communicator	Internal employee updates	Internal	2x/month	2,000 – 2,200
Agricultural News Bulletin	Ag Preservation Board updates, community events, and PDR applications	External	As needed	760
Misc. Bulletins	Emergency mgmt. alerts, board vacancies, job notices, KCCA alerts, etc.	Internal and External	As needed	Varies by Topic

* *Please note that additional subscribers are added to newsletters based on whether the newsletter content matches their job role, interests, or other relevant criteria.*

Digital Media Audit & Analysis

We audited 22 Kent County social media pages across five platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, X/Twitter, and YouTube). These channels represent the following entities:

- Kent County

- Animal Shelter

- Community Action

- Health Department

- Parks

- Parks - Kaufman Golf Course

- Wabasis Lake Campground, and

- Veterans Services

Our team analyzed six months of content on these Kent County social media channels in 2023. We found that some pages are strong while some need to leverage best practices.

Detailed analysis and takeaways from this audit along with recommendations for each page are outlined in the Digital Strategies & Tactics section, below.

Audiences

Primary

INTERNAL

- Members of the Board of Commissioners
- Countywide elected officials and their staffs
- Department and agency leaders
- Department and agency staff

EXTERNAL

- Kent County residents
- Prospective talent (local and outside Kent County)
- Local units of government in Kent County
    - Cities
    - Townships
    - Villages
- Community partners & stakeholders
    - Arts and cultural institutions
    - Businesses and business groups
    - Community organizations representing and serving BIPOC residents
    - Economic development organizations (i.e., RPI, EXGR, GA2.0)
    - Educational institutions (K12 districts, colleges and universities)
    - Foundations and philanthropic community

- o Health care institutions

- o Housing organizations and advocacy groups

- o Nonprofit organizations

- o Publicly affiliated authorities and community development organizations (i.e., CAA, DDA, DGRI)

- State of Michigan

  - o Governor's office

  - o State departments, offices and agencies

  - o State Senators and Representatives

- Federal Lawmakers

  - o U.S. Senators and their staffs

  - o Michigan delegation of the U.S. House of Representatives and their staffs

Secondary

- Other county governments in the region

- Visitors

- Prospective residents

- Prospective employers

- Individuals who work in Kent County but live elsewhere

Objectives

We have identified the following objectives as steps to advance the goals outlined above.

- Kent County's visibility and reputation within the community through communication and direct community engagement is improved by an increased survey score of at least 20% by December 31, 2024.

- By December 31, 2024, resident surveys reflect:

  - An improved understanding of Kent County services.

  - At least a 75% overall satisfaction with County communications.

  - That County communications more effectively and consistently reach new Americans, non-English speakers and historically marginalized communities where they live.

  - A heightened sense of community and belonging among *all* demographic groups in Kent County.

- Kent County leaders and team members are sought out and engaged as critical partners in vital community initiatives.

- Kent County leaders and team members regularly seek out and engage community stakeholders in partnerships to advance the County's mission.

- Increase County staff retention by further implementing the 6 C's.

- The demographics of the Kent County team—including the leadership team—are more reflective of the community by December 31, 2025.

- Increase the frequency of positive or neutral earned media coverage about vital County programs as well as County-led community initiatives and achievements.

- The County is making better use of data to help understand its audiences and more effectively communicate with the community.

- More effectively leverage the power of social media to reach younger and more diverse populations where they are, listen to the community, gain insight into their priorities and be more responsive to their needs.

- Increase followers across all social media pages by 4% year over year.

- All Kent County social media platforms have integrated best practices and follow Kent County Social Media Guidelines.

Messaging

Frame & Narrative

Kent County: Your partner, your place.

> Good governments are good partners. And good government partners collaborate to create great communities. Kent County is that kind of government. We are partnering to build a place where people feel welcome, can thrive and want to call their own.

What makes a place your place?

When you think of home, what comes to mind? Beyond the address where you live, what are the things that truly make a place *your* place?

The descriptions are likely as diverse as the people you ask.

Kent County is home to 664,000 residents—a place where 29% of residents identify as racially or ethnically diverse and 55% are under the age of 35.

With nine cities, five villages, 21 townships, abundant water, woodlands and greenspaces, and more than 157,000 acres of farmland, Kent County has a place for everyone.

When you add nine colleges and universities, a low unemployment rate, 130 international manufacturing companies in the region, 60,000 health science jobs and $1.5 billion in regional agribusiness, clearly, Kent County is a great place to learn, work and do business.

Home to some of the best health care systems and services in the state, nearly 7,800 acres of parks and public greenspaces, 140 miles of trails, four professional sports teams, and arts and cultural festivals and institutions that include an international art competition, the nation's first community-wide annual comedy festival, Michigan's only professional ballet company, a nationally-recognized

symphony orchestra, the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, an acclaimed art museum, a children's museum, a public museum undertaking a $50 million expansion, one of the top mid-sized arenas in the country, a world class performance hall and convention center, and a 30-acre botanical garden and sculpture park that is one of the 100 most visited in the world, it's no wonder that Kent County is the fastest growing county in Michigan and a place we are all proud to call home.

A partner in your corner.

Kent County government is comprised of 21 departments and offices powered by nearly 2,000 team members who provide enriching, vital, even life-saving services to residents throughout the county.

Kent County is an exciting corner of the world. Whether you live, work, go to school or operate a business here, we are a partner in your corner.

The resources you need in the place you love.

Through emergency housing and utility assistance, weatherization services, senior services, community development and food distribution programs, **Kent County Community Action** is a champion for tens of thousands of people each year who don't have a voice, are struggling and are in need.

Kent County Veterans Services provides a hand up to area veterans and their families by connecting them to county, state and federal services and agencies to enhance their quality of life and ensure they get the benefits, answers and support they deserve.

Partnering to build a healthy community.

Through four public health clinics, a dental clinic partnership, programs for children and families with special needs, WIC programming, programs to prevent lead exposure, disease tracking and testing, immunizations, food safety services, well and septic permitting and more, the **Kent County Health Department** serves, protects and promotes a healthy community for all residents.

Your place for adventure

With 43 parks spanning nearly 7,800 acres and featuring water, woodlands, greenspaces and 140 miles of trails, **Kent County Parks** offer accessible places for everyone to enjoy the natural beauty of West Michigan's four seasons.

Your partner in sustainable solutions

Reduce landfill waste by 90% by 2030. That's a bold goal—and the driving vision for the **Kent County Department of Public Works**. As the operator of recycling centers that process 4,000 tons of steel each year, a waste-to-energy plant that produces energy to continually power over 10,000 households and a landfill serving over 600,000 residents, the department handles its fair share of trash.

Plans are in the works to divert the bulk of that waste to an innovative sustainable business park by 2030 and turn it into bioenergy, fertilizer, and other valuable materials that can be remanufactured into everything from clothing to containers to construction materials.

Your place to meet your new best friend.

A haven for lost, unwanted and abused animals, **the Kent County Animal Shelter** provides food, shelter, medical intervention, compassionate care and placement services for thousands of dogs, cats and other animals each year. The shelter also spearheads initiatives to teach responsible pet ownership and prevent pet overpopulation, suffering and homelessness.

Through careful vetting, the shelter aims to ensure that every adoption leads to a lifelong bond of love and companionship.

Find your place in Kent County.

These are just a few of the vital programs and services Kent County operates to help create *the* place that is *your* place to call home.

NOTE: Due to the extraordinary breadth of programs and services provided and operated by Kent County, this section is intended as sample messaging, only. As needs arise, we can partner with County staff to build out messaging for specific platforms and purposes.

Messengers

While Kent County should strive to cultivate brand ambassadors among its team members, community partners and stakeholders, designated County leadership team members should serve as primary official spokespersons for Kent County. Ideally, this roster of spokespersons should reflect the diversity of the County team and of the community it represents.

It is important that those who serve as spokespersons are fully informed about relevant issues and comfortable talking with the media and in front of stakeholders and community groups.

> Further, to respect the bright line between government and politics, Kent County staff spokespersons should refrain from representing or advancing the partisan interests or positions of any political party or individual elected official. **The staff's role is to deliver on the County's mission for all residents, without bias.**

We recommend that the following individuals serve as spokespersons for the County due to their expertise and/or their position. Spokespersons would be determined based on the issue, the opportunity and availability.

Primary Spokespersons

- Board of Commissioners Chair
- Administrator Al Vanderberg
- Sheriff Michelle LaJoye-Young*
- Clerk Lisa Posthumus Lyons*
- Prosecutor Chris Becker*
- Treasurer Peter MacGregor*
- Drain Commissioner Ken Yonker*

NOTE: The five countywide elected officials serve as independent spokespersons for their respective offices and programs.

Secondary & Topical Spokespersons

- Assistant County Administrator Lori Latham

- Deputy County Administrator Jennifer James

- Deputy County Administrator Mark Rambo

- Chief Inclusion Officer Teresa Branson

- Sheriff's Office PIO Sergeant Kailey Gilbert

- Emergency Management Coordinator Matt Groesser

- Director of Kent County Health Department Adam London

- Designated Senior Staff Members, Kent County Health Department

- Director of Kent County Parks Department Ben Swayze

- Director of Kent County Community Action Gustavo Perez

- Director of Kent County Veterans Services (TBD)

- Director of Kent County Animal Shelter Angela Hollinshead

- Director of the Department of Public Works Dar Baas

- Public Works Communications and Marketing Manager, TBD

- Administrative Communications Managers, Phil Meade and TBD

Strategies & Tactics

Considering findings from the discovery and research, we identified the following strategies to help Kent County achieve the goals outlined in the opening pages of this plan, and we recommend the related tactics to put those strategic intents into action.

Board Member Connectivity

STRATEGY

Create and strengthen connections and understanding between members of the Board of Commissioners, staff and constituents.

TACTICS

1. Host biannual Kent County Showcase

Feature selected County departments, programs and services at a biannual showcase for Board members and staff. Structured as a tabling event, featured teams can engage with Commissioners and fellow team members in an open house setting. Teams would be encouraged to come prepared with stories and data that highlight the impact Kent County has on our community.

2. Host quarterly Kent County Quadrant Community Forums

Modeled on the successful Kent County Quadrant Meetings for local units of government, the Quadrant Community Forums will bring County leaders and team members into communities across the county to engage with members of the community. Board of Commission members would participate in the quadrant meeting nearest their district.

These meetings will be designed to reach beyond LUG leadership to residents, neighborhood and community groups that could benefit from County programs and services. They can be hosted at local community centers to draw on their constituencies.

The County can feature the same programs and services featured at the biannual showcases to create synergy and efficiency between the educational events.

Staffing Structure and Empowerment

STRATEGY

Create a communications staffing structure that enables the County to effectively and consistently inform and engage a diverse population and empowers public-facing departments to partner with the administration in this effort.

TACTICS

1. Form an Interdepartmental Communications Task Force.

Outward-facing departments will each appoint a staff member to serve on the task force. The assigned individual should be familiar with the external communications priorities and practices within their department. A member of the administrative communications team will chair the task force

The task force will be responsible for sharing information about departmental priorities and initiatives, identifying opportunities for coordinated communications, providing input on a shared Master Content Calendar (see Media Relations and Digital Media Tactics, below), and relaying information back to their respective departments. They will meet regularly, i.e., biweekly, to keep interdepartmental lines of communication open and ensure well-coordinated communications.

The chair will serve as the liaison between the task force and the administrative communications team, ensuring that departmental issues ladder up, as needed.

2. As the budget allows, add administrative level communications team members dedicated to supporting outward-facing department level communications.

The Department Communications Managers would be part of the Communications Department but would be embedded on multiple department teams. In this role, they would become fully versed in the operations, programs and priorities of the departments, enabling them to provide department-level communications support and enhance connections and engagement with the community, all while following administration level standards and protocols.

Departments that would benefit from this structure include Animal Shelter, Community Action, Health, Human Resources, Parks and Veterans Services. For instance, one Department Communications Manager could be assigned to the Animal Shelter, HR and Parks and a second to Community Action, Health and Veterans Services.

These team members would lead departmental digital communications, identify story opportunities and draft content for newsletters and other platforms, serve as first points of contact for the media on departmental issues, and identify and staff relevant community engagement opportunities throughout the county.

3. Create a video production and management role in the communications department to better leverage the power of video storytelling (see related Digital Media tactics).

As budget and/or capacity allow, dedicate all or a portion of a communications staff member's time to video production. Focus on stories that demonstrate the reach and impact of County programs and services and county-wide initiatives and utilize Studio Kent for video production.

The video production manager will glean content direction from the interdepartmental communications task force, administration, "Ladder Up" platform and Kent County Community Ambassadors (see related tactics, below).

STRATEGY

Empower County storytellers.

TACTICS

1. Provide media/speaker training for primary, secondary and topical spokespersons.

As the County continues to expand its proactive efforts to get its story out through the media and community engagement, it will be important that subject matter experts are prepared to effectively tell that story. To this end, we recommend that the County implement media/speaker training for primary, secondary and topical spokespersons.

2. Establish a Kent County Community Ambassadors program.

Identify a diverse group of 10 - 15 County staff members from various departments who are interested in and capable of serving as brand ambassadors in the community. Each will be charged with identifying one opportunity each quarter where, individually, they can extend the County's reach into the community and directly engage with residents to build awareness of County programs and services.

This will include engagement in quarterly Community Quadrant Meetings (see tactic below) and could include activities like volunteering at the Latinx Youth Conference hosted by the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan or participating in a Lunch & Learn hosted by Housing Next and Habitat for Humanity—then engaging in a related project.

The demographics of the group should reflect those of Kent County.

The group will work with the HR and communications departments to establish goals, parameters and protocols for engagement and will meet on a regular basis, i.e., monthly or every other month to discuss and identify opportunities and report on their experiences.

Feature ambassadors in County video storytelling. (See "I Am Kent County" tactic below.)

3. Maintain a regular curriculum of internal "Kent County 101" forums.

Cultivate pride and a strong sense of investment in the County's work by expanding the series of internal forums that provide opportunities for team members to directly engage with leadership and learn about countywide initiatives. This series is differentiated from the "Kent County Showcase" in that it is structured as a dialogue and provides staff a chance to engage directly with the Administrator, Deputy Administrators and other leaders. Consider including a couple Board members on a rotating basis.

Integrate County video storytelling into these forums. (See "I am Kent County" tactic below.)

4. Create a "Ladder it Up" platform to collect County impact stories.

This platform will create a place where employees can easily and regularly share stories that demonstrate the reach and impact of County programs and services. Team members will share their impact stories on a platform like Google Forms or other online form and submit the story to the administration communications team.

The communications team will review the stories and determine if they should ladder up to an internal or external storytelling opportunity, such as a video, social media content, Administrator's Digest article, or earned media pitch. Before moving forward, all stories will be vetted by the appropriate department head.

STRATEGY

Empower County team members to participate in the talent attraction process.

TACTICS

1. Draw on Kent County Community Ambassadors in talent attraction efforts.

Engage ambassadors in job and career fairs, feature them in video testimonials and work with them to identify community-based activities and events with a recruitment component where they can represent the County.

2. Create team testimonial videos.

Work with the communications team to identify "Ladder Up" stories that can be turned into video testimonials for use in recruitment efforts. Use the videos on social media, in digital ads and at career fairs.

STRATEGY

Establish internal communications protocols to increase efficiency and service delivery.

TACTICS

1. Assign Board-related internal communications to an administrative team member, clearly outline expectations of the job, and hold that person accountable for clear, timely and consistent communications with County staff.

Description: The assigned team member will identify or create internal communications protocols and tools, i.e., Weekly Board Briefing, and establish a timeline for when critical information pertaining to Board and Committee meetings must be shared with department and office leaders and/or team members. The timeline for communications should allow team members adequate time to prepare Board and Committee reports and presentations. Create a mechanism to ensure that those assigned to report and present are notified immediately of any agenda changes.

2. Maximize use of the Emergency Management Everbridge mass notification system.

Assign a cross-departmental team, led by the administration and Emergency Management personnel, to explore ways that Everbridge can improve internal/interdepartmental emergency notifications and team response.

The team should identify opportunities to use the system's capability to send customizable notifications to specific groups. This could include tailoring messages for different departments ensuring that relevant information immediately reaches the appropriate audience. Further, the County should establish clear and well-defined notification protocols outlining responsibilities and training for various departments in emergencies.

Led by Emergency Management, a similar assessment and expansion of Everbridge utilization should be undertaken to more effectively reach external audiences regarding critical events.

Community Relations

STRATEGY

Leverage coordinated communications between the County and local municipalities to advance shared interests.

TACTICS

1. Convene deputy-level City of Grand Rapids/Kent County working group.

Formalize discussions among Deputy and Assistant Kent County Administrators and Deputy and Assistant Grand Rapids City Managers.

Determine a meeting cadence that will allow the team to keep each other apprised of respective priorities, plans and initiatives and collaborate to advance shared interests and initiatives.

Consider expanding this working group to include other municipalities.

2. Form a Regional LUG Communications Council

Convene quarterly meetings of individuals who handle communications for local units of government throughout Kent County to identify opportunities for coordinated communications efforts, foster meaningful discussions with stakeholders and help to advance common interests.

STRATEGY

Build on proven strategies to directly connect and engage with residents, constituent groups, stakeholders and community leaders.

TACTICS

1. Elevate the annual State of the County event and work to increase its reach and impact.

Continue to seek ways to enhance the annual State of the County address through a more engaging format such as a moderated discussion and creative use of video.

Challenge guests to bring one guest who has not attended the address before, has limited knowledge of Kent County, could benefit from learning more and could help advance County initiatives and interests in the community.

Collaborate with the BIPOC Community Council (see related tactic, below) to build and diversify the audience.

2. Host quarterly Kent County Quadrant Community Forums

As described in the Board Connectivity section above, these forums are modeled on the successful Kent County Quadrant Meetings for local units of government and will bring County leaders and—importantly—team members into communities across the county to engage with members of the community.

The County can feature the same programs and services featured at the biannual showcases to create synergy and efficiency between the educational events.

These meetings will be designed to reach residents, neighborhood and community groups that could benefit from County programs and services. Kent County Community Ambassadors will play a lead role in these engagements.

3. Increase the County's presence at community events, particularly those that reach BIPOC residents

Follow the lead of the Sheriff's Office and engage with residents where they are. Seek opportunities for administration, County program staff, and elected officials to participate in events organized by community groups, specifically, those that reach constituencies that may have language and cultural barriers or those that could benefit most from County services.

4. Continue to build Administrator's Digest subscriptions

This tool was universally praised by internal and external audiences alike. While it has a circulation of over 10,000, its impact can be even greater with a larger subscriber base.

Ways to increase reach include:

- Geo-targeted paid digital campaign
- Share content with aligned community newsletters, i.e., Friends of Experience Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids Chamber, The Right Place. Include "subscribe here" link in shared articles.
- QR code postcards at Kent County Quadrant Community Forums, other public meetings and in department and agency offices that get public foot traffic
- Add a link to the newsletter subscription page on the "I Am Kent County" landing page (see Digital Media Strategies and Tactics, below)

5. Implement a monthly Deputy Directors' Briefing email

Send to community stakeholders with shared interests in ongoing County initiatives and partnerships with other local units of government.

6. Create more transparent and efficient external communications related to Board and Committee meeting agendas.

Disable the system that sends notices that "an agenda has changed" and in its place implement a notification system that stipulates which agenda for which meeting and either links directly to the relevant agenda or states in the body of the email what has changed.

STRATEGY

Deepen relationships and collaborate with trusted BIPOC leaders and community-based organizations to learn from and engage diverse voices in the work of the County.

TACTICS

1. Build on successful County collaborations with organizations representing and serving BIPOC communities.

Broaden collaborations already formed between organizations serving or representing BIPOC communities and various County departments, offices and agencies—such as the Health Department's partnerships with the West Michigan Asian American Association and Hispanic Center of West Michigan. Explore other program synergies and identify opportunities to collaborate to better serve the communities these groups represent.

2. Establish a BIPOC Community Council.

Appoint representatives from the County administration and relevant departments, offices and agencies. Invite trusted leaders from BIPOC communities in Kent County to meet to discuss community needs, relevant County programs and services, opportunities to collaborate to better serve constituents and contribute to Kent County's overall success.

Identify ways to borrow on the established trust of leaders within BIPOC and culturally diverse communities through genuine, mutually beneficial partnerships.

Work with this group to identify qualified candidates—both from inside and outside of Kent County—for County leadership and team positions as opportunities arise.

3. Host hiring fairs in collaboration with trusted community groups that represent and serve diverse communities.

Explore collaborative opportunities with BIPOC Community Council.

Ensure that Kent County communications reflect the diversity of our residents.

1. Continue to expand multilingual communications on all Kent County communications platforms.

Explore opportunities to reach an increasingly diverse population on all County platforms, from the website to facility signage.

Consider expanding successful funding models, such as the Health Equity Council mini-grant model, to help fund translation and community engagement services through community-based organizations that already enjoy the trust of the community.

2. Tailor talent recruitment efforts to reach culturally diverse populations to increase diversity among the Kent County team, including County leadership.

Use the "I Am Kent County" video series to feature diverse Kent County leaders and team members. (See p. 51)

Tailor paid digital recruitment campaigns to reach diverse audiences.

Work with BIPOC organizations to identify qualified candidates—both from inside and outside of Kent County—for team and leadership positions as opportunities arise.

Media Relations

STRATEGY

Ensure that spokespersons are well-equipped, informed and prepared to speak for the County.

TACTICS

1. Provide media/speaker training for primary, secondary and topical spokespersons.

See Staffing Structure and Empowerment section above for details.

2. Establish clear protocols for fielding and referring media inquiries.

Whenever possible, general County media inquiries should be referred to Assistant County Administrator, Lori Latham, for dissemination. However, to alleviate pressure on that single position, we recommend designating a Communications Manager as an alternate to field and vet routine inquiries and ladder them up, as needed.

Media inquiries that come in directly to the Sheriff's, Clerk's, Prosecutor's, Treasurer's and Drain Commissioner's Offices, as well as to the communications officer at the Department of Public Works, may be handled directly; however, the County Administration Communications Department is available to assist. When the topic of the inquiry is highly sensitive or is likely to generate broad, ongoing coverage, protocols should be in place to notify the administration's communications team.

3. Develop an integrated content calendar that focuses on the impact of Kent County's work.

Identify content related to County programs and services, collaborations and other topics that demonstrate community relevance and impact.

Draw ideas from the administration, board action, "Ladder Up" platform, Interdepartmental Communications Task Force and Community Ambassadors.

The calendar should outline the schedule for distributing proactive media materials for the month ahead and should be updated weekly or as needed, based on new developments.

Integrate content calendar across earned media, social media, video and newsletters.

4. Continue to serve as a transparent, honest and respectful source of vital information to members of the media.

Communications team members should make an effort to cultivate relationships "when you don't need them." Take a reporter to coffee. Host occasional meet and greets with the County communications team, a handful of departmental representatives, and the editorial team from a particular media outlet. Rather than pitching stories, use the gatherings to highlight new and upcoming initiatives and build relationships. Include outlets that reach Spanish-speaking and other diverse communities in the rotation of meetings.

Digital Media

As noted in the Research section above, the team audited the following 22 Kent County social media pages across five platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, X/Twitter, and YouTube). These channels represent the following entities:

- Kent County

- Animal Shelter

- Community Action

- Health Department

- Parks

- Parks - Kaufman Golf Course

- Wabasis Lake Campground, and

- Veterans Service

We did not review and provide analysis for pages operated by County elected officials and their offices.

We also did a cursory review of AccessKent.com; however, we did not take a deep dive into the site because Kent County has entered into a contract with Civic Plus to overhaul the website in 2024.

The following general and page-specific analysis and recommendations aim to further establish Kent County as a go-to thought leader and the source for critical information for stakeholders and residents in West Michigan.

We begin with some general strategies and tactical recommendations that apply across platforms and channels.

STRATEGY

Coordinate and align content across channels.

TACTIC

1. Create a centralized monthly content calendar

The centralized calendar should house all County and department social content, anticipated holidays and other featured events for the month ahead. The calendar can be categorized by topic, with post copy and assets collected under each topic. One-off posts containing urgent or unanticipated but timely content would still be added, as needed, to the post rotation.

The Interdepartmental Communications Task Force would be responsible for identifying and coordinating monthly content, updating the calendar and implementing related posts.

STRATEGY

Further diversify digital platforms and tactics to increase reach and engagement among audiences aged 18-25.

TACTIC

1. Expand efforts to better connect with younger audience groups, specifically using Instagram Reels and other video content.

Leverage the power of video in County storytelling.

1. Launch an "I Am Kent County" video campaign

Capture the stories of a diverse cross section of Kent County team members to tell the larger story of what the County does, and the impact County programs, services and PEOPLE have on the community.

Establish a dedicated "I Am Kent County" YouTube channel or feature on Kent County, MI channel.

Use videos in social content, at community events, at the State of the County address, in recruitment advertising and at the Kent County Showcase events.

2. Create videos that put a spotlight on the impact of Kent County programs and services.

Feature compelling stories about seniors, families and veterans whose lives were significantly changed by vital Community Action and Veterans Services programs. Tell the story of a day in the life of a public health nurse. Don a Go Pro and ride or ski the trails at some Kent County Parks.

Use videos in social content, on YouTube, at Quadrant Community Forums, at the State of the County address, and at the Kent County Showcase events.

- The Kent County social media policy link should be added to the About section on LinkedIn and Facebook pages and as a page bio link on Instagram for all pages that do not already display it for consistency.

- Videos, such as the 2023 Year in Review video, should be uploaded to a dedicated page on the website or to the YouTube page before they are posted on social media. This will enable the video to open and play at full

size when shared from a third-party site rather than opening in a smaller preview view.

- Create content across all department pages in the format of10 - :60 vertical videos and sharing these videos to Instagram Reels and Facebook Stories. Ideas include:

    o Capture horizontal videos from relevant departments such as the Health Department, Community Action and Parks to mix in between meeting recap videos on YouTube.

    o Create the "I Am Kent County" series of video testimonials from people who enjoy working at Kent County. These can be published to LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram Reels and YouTube to help position Kent County as a great place to work.

    o Develop a video series on Parks safety such as tips that lead up to the busy summer season.

    o Develop a video series featuring a selection of Kent County's 43 parks, greenspaces and regional trails—select 3 per season and feature monthly seasonal activities in each video.

    o Create regular montages of Animal Shelter dogs and cats heading home with their new families.

Detailed analysis, takeaways and recommendations for each of the 22 social media pages reviewed are outlined below.

Kent County Channels

Kent County Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/KentCountyMI
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: ~12,000

Analysis and takeaways:

- Posts are very timely and relevant.

- There is little repetition.

- Great use of emojis in post copy to engage users.

- Consistent tone and posting cadence.

- Copy length follows best practices.

- Good use of real photos. They perform better than graphics and stock photos.

- Excellent mix of different department content.

- Great blend of original content and content shared from other relevant pages.

- Outstanding, quick, unique responses to comments on posts from users.

- Significant use of real people to share messaging through posts containing interviews or statements, both with images and videos.

- [This post](#) is an example of a great post because of its use of third-party tags, call-to-action and use of a URL shortener to find out more.

- [This post](#) is an example of a post that could have improvements.
    - All text in graphics should be clear enough to read.
    - Minimize the amount of text in graphics.
    - Tag partners mentioned in the post copy.

Recommendations:

- Pin the timeliest information recently posted to the top of the page for greater visibility.

- Use the Kent County location tag for the page and content to be more discoverable.

- Leverage the Stories feature to show up in more users' feeds.

- Link out to press releases published on the website, instead of sharing the whole release as an image.

- Redesign flyers to be social media graphics instead of posting the flier as it. The text should be reduced and be larger font size. Keep in mind some of the content can be put in the post copy above the image.

- Be sure to include at least one sentence of commentary or a down arrow emoji above shared content in posts from another page to reinforce why their messaging is important.

- React with a like to all positive post comments so that users get sent a notification and it ultimately reinforces their relationship with you.

- Be consistent with URLs in the post copy. With links that do not use a shortened bit.ly link, remove the "https://" and "www." for a clean, functional link without unneeded characters.

- Ensure post and timeline images are formatted to fit Facebook's current standards - 1200 x 630 pixels or 1.91 x 1 aspect ratio. Facebook has moved away from square images and will add colored bookends to uploaded square images.

Kent County Instagram
https://www.instagram.com/kentcountymi
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 2,425

Analysis and takeaways:

- Perfect use of right-sized square imagery in posts.

- Video should be used and mixed in to post content.

- More branding could be used to have a consistent feel to the page, such as an overlay or logo in the lower right corner added to photo images.

- Very few comments on any of the posts.

- This post is an example of a great post because of its use of hashtags and emojis and subsequent engagement.

- This post is an example of a post that could use improvements.
  - Text is cut off due to wrong size imagery

o   Unclickable links mentioned in the post copy.

Recommendations:

- This platform is the biggest area for potential growth. Besides TikTok and YouTube, Instagram is the most popular social media platform with Gen Z — your next cohort of employees and residents. Leverage this page for recruitment efforts.

- Tactics to grow the network organically, such as Reels and Stories, should be leveraged in addition to timeline posts to be more discoverable to users. Reels currently reach 4x more users on average than Stories.

- Do not include links within post copy as they are not clickable, and this is a common indicator that the posts are not being written properly. If more links need to be added to the bio section beyond the two currently in place, a free third-party linktr.ee account can be set up to share as many links as needed at one time.

- Add a very common location tag, such as Grand Rapids, to each timeline post and Story to be discovered by users seeking content in the area.

- Increase posting as frequently as posting on Facebook, aiming for at least 3-4 posts or Reels and 3-4 Stories per week.

- Follow more partner, vendor, community leader, and city pages within the county to encourage them to follow you back on the platform.

- Use calls-to-action that encourage engagement and opinions shared by followers through comments below the posts.

Kent County YouTube - Kent County, MI
https://www.youtube.com/@kentcountymi731
Subscribers as of June 6, 2024: 652

Analysis and takeaways:

- The two most popular videos on this page are career/a day in the life focused, and we should plan for more of that style content.

- Promising cadence, publishing videos approximately two times per week.

- Good to see use of the cover image - could use human faces instead of a building to be more compelling.

Kent County YouTube - Kent County Livestream Channel
https://www.youtube.com/@kentcountylivestreamchanne7898
Subscribers as of June 6, 2024: 551

Recommendations:

- Create a dedicated Kent County Board of Commissioners YouTube channel where all board and committee meeting videos are posted and where people access the Livestream for board and committee meetings.

- Use the Kent County, MI YouTube channel to share warmer, more engaging human-interest videos, i.e., "A Day in the Life," County employee testimonials ("Your plan for the future" and "Your partner, your place" style pieces), messages from Kent County Brand Ambassadors, "Ladder Up" program impact stories, and "I am Kent County" videos (see related recommendations on pp. 42, 43 and 51).

- Better define video titles with keywords and phrases for the way people search online - for example, Kent County Legislative & Human Resources 12-12-23 should be: Kent County Legislative and Human Resources Committee Meeting Recap December 12, 2023.

- Leverage the description of each video to include more keywords relevant to Kent County and the video topic and a link to the website.

- Similar to other KC social media pages, fill in the About section and include the website link at the end of the section.

- Consider creating a branded thumbnail graphic that can be uploaded as the preview image when publishing videos.

Kent County X (Twitter)
https://x.com/KentCountyMI
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 879

Analysis and takeaways:

- Social media icon logo on the bottom of the AccessKent.com home page should be updated to the new X logo.

- Good use of displaying the KC social media policy in the page bio.

- Right mix of original and shared content.

- Great work tagging media outlets in post copy when referring to a story of theirs.

- This post is an example of a great post following best practices.

- This post is an example of a post that could be improved.

    - Don't publish full press releases as an image, as they are too long and difficult to read. Instead, share a graphic of a preview and link out to the full press release published on the website.

Recommendations:

- Pin the timeliest information recently posted to the top of the page for greater visibility.

- Continue to publish posts at least 2-3 times per week.

- Make sure action language applies to the platform's settings - 'swipe' doesn't accurately apply to this platform like it does for Instagram.

- Tag prominent organizations and individuals who have a presence on this platform when mentioned in post copy, such as Governor Whitmer.

Analysis and takeaways:

- Good use of line spacing for easy readability.

- Nice incorporation of bolded text to emphasize meaningful sentences.

- This channel could use the most work of any social media pages.

- Inconsistent publishing styles are prevalent.

- This post is an example of a great post that follows best practices to emulate.

- This post is an example of a post that needs improvements.

  - Stick to one link, not two. Links should be at the end of the copy. Add a line of spacing above hashtags for better readability. Reduce text on graphic - it should look like a graphic not a flier. Keep in mind that most users are viewing on their phone and are unable to take a photo of a QR code while in the LinkedIn app.

Recommendations:

- A clickable LinkedIn icon should be added to AccessKent.com alongside the social media icons, as it is a key platform utilized and where your many audiences reside.

- Add 2-3 related hashtags at the bottom of each post copy after a line break for more reach - these can be topic based or location based such as #WestMichigan, #KentCounty or #GrandRapids.

- Encourage all admins to write content and spacing in the same way.

- #NowHiring is a common LinkedIn hashtag that sometimes gets featured in a special LinkedIn section. We suggest using this hashtag in employment posts.

- Use more diversity in image and video assets.

- Share content that refers to progress on promises made, for example, detail how passed millages are being properly used.

- Aim to post at least 1-2 times per week to keep engagement up.

- Ensure a link shared has time to populate an image before publishing, or if the link does not produce an image, upload a corresponding image. Every post should have an asset to take up more real estate in users' feeds.

- Add video assets in post content as they perform better than images with the current algorithm.

- Add call-to-actions before links sharing livestreams.

- Use a colon or right-facing arrow between call-to-actions and the link to signify to click.

Animal Shelter Channels

Kent County Animal Shelter Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/KentCountyAnimalShelter
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 44,000

Analysis and takeaways:

- Exceptional use of engaging emojis and imagery.

- Add call-to-actions and links, such as when mentioning a pet available for adoption like on this post, identify where users can go to find out more information.

- This post is an example of a great post using best practices.

- This post is an example of a post that could use improvements.

    o End the post copy with the link. Consider using a link shortener for a cleaner look, such as a bit.ly which is no cost to use.

    o Reduce the amount of text on the graphic, as it can be added to the post copy instead. Ensure the font size on the graphic is readable.

Recommendations:

- Highlight more volunteers to encourage volunteering.

- Find reasons to tag and/or promote following the Kent County Facebook page.

- Use a location tag in posts, such as Kent County or Grand Rapids, to be more discoverable.

- Stick with the same 1-2 fonts and 2-3 colors for better branding on social graphics for a more consistent look.

- Consider adding closed captions to uploaded videos for better accessibility.

Kent County Animal Shelter Instagram
https://www.instagram.com/kentcountyanimalshelter
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 5,904

- Analysis and takeaways:

- Exceptional use of engaging emojis and imagery.

- This post is an example of a great post using best practices.

- This post is an example of a post that could use improvements.

    o Screenshot a square image of the web page to use as the graphic so nothing is cut off on the Instagram page grid.

    o Keep URLs out of post copy and no need to use forward slashes at the end of a link.

Recommendations:

- Remove the non-clickable link from the bio description and add to the links section - Instagram now offers more than 1 link to be shared in the links section.

- Do not write out URLs in post copy, instead tell users where to find the link - in your bio.

- Leverage Stories and Reels.

- Use videos on Reels that are not from TikTok - Instagram's algorithm often discourages videos that have the TikTok logo stamped on them and reduces the number of times they will appear in users' feeds.

- Add a location tag to each post for greater discoverability.

- Consider revamping the Highlights section to categories of your focus areas and keep it to only four so users will not have to scroll right to see them - Adopt, Foster, Donate and Volunteer.

Community Action Channels

Kent County Community Action Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/communityactionkent
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 705

Analysis and takeaways:

- Great use of stand-out branding in profile photo, cover photo and on graphics.

- Good use of a pinned post to highlight volunteer opportunities.

- This post is an example of a great post using best practices.

- This post is an example of a post that could use improvements.
    - Stick to one link per post.

Recommendations:

- Remove 'https://' and 'www.' from the start of links shared in post copy or mentioned on a graphic for a cleaner look that will still produce a functional link.

- Reduce the amount of text on graphics for better readability - do not use flyers as graphics without recreating to format for social media.

- Don't publish full press releases as images that get cut off on social, instead link out to the press release that is posted on a dedicated web page.

- Use hashtags sparingly and stick to two or less relevant hashtags on a post. Hashtags do not trend on Facebook the way they do on LinkedIn, Instagram or Twitter.

- Consider adding an Instagram account to reach more people in the community, especially those 35 and under.

Kent County Community Action X (Twitter)
https://x.com/ActionKent
Followers as of June 6, 2024: 36

Analysis and takeaways:

- Good use of bio section with physical address and URL represented.

Recommendations:

- The page has been inactive for more than two years - consider a strategy to spend one to two hours per week to keep it active or delete the page. If keeping active:

  o Follow more community leaders and local media outlets and journalists in an effort they follow back and engage with the page.

  o Replace the pinned post to a post more current than 2020.

  o Only use one link per post.

  o Only use imagery with text that won't get cut off and is legible.

  o Update the profile photo and cover photo to contain the logo of the new branding.

Health Department Channels

Kent County Health Department Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/kentcountyhealth
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 30,000

Analysis and takeaways:

- Largest following of any department social media page.

- Good use of shortened URLs.

- This post is an example of a post that follows best practices.

- This post is an example of a post that could use improvements.

    o No need to tag self in post copy.

    o Add more info in post copy such as the duration of the restaurant week.

    o Map preview is too small to stand out in users' scrolls.

Recommendations:

- Turn off the option for the reviews section, as it doesn't apply since this is not a business and the last review is spam.

- Use a colon or arrow in front of a link or a phone number in post copy to better direct viewers to click or call.

- No need to put a period after a link.

- Refer to the Health Department in first person in post copy, such as 'we' or 'our'.

- Pin the post containing the most recent newsletter to the top of the page.

- Use less text on graphics.

Kent County Health Department Instagram
https://www.instagram.com/kentcountyhealth
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 1,491

Analysis and takeaways:

- Good use of two links in the bio, including the social media policy.

- Adequate description in bio.

- [This post](#) is an example of a post that follows best practices.

- [This post](#) is an example of a post that could use improvements.

    o No post copy included. Old logo was used.

    o Graphic should be square; text is cut off on image preview on page grid.

Recommendations:

- Use less text on graphics. No need to use "https://" and "www." at the start of links.

- Follow more accounts, especially all Kent County department accounts, and local thought leaders in effort they follow back and engage with the page.

- Don't use links in post copy as they are not clickable.

- Upload all videos in the vertical Reels sizing, 1080 pixels x 1920 pixels, not as a square video.

- Leverage Stories and select important Stories to save at the top of the page in the Highlights section.

- Select a location for each post to be more discoverable by people in your region.

- Use 2-3 relevant hashtags at the end of the post copy, with a line of spacing before the hashtags for a readable look.

Kent County Health Department YouTube
https://www.youtube.com/@kchdnewsnetwork7573
Subscribers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 903

Analysis and takeaways:

- Great use of playlists.

- Four new videos in the last six months.

- More active than many other Michigan county pages.

Recommendations:

- Several videos received over 200k views in past years, while current videos are reaching 100 users. While this is likely due to the pandemic, techniques such as working in commonly searched phrases and more keywords to video titles at the front, i.e., Kent County Health Department, can boost engagement.

- Add a web page link to find out more information and send subscribers to your website at the end of every video description text.

- Aim to upload at least one video per month and select the option to notify followers when uploaded.

- Fill out the About section and consider using the new logo/branding for the profile photo and cover photo.

- Videos that are 7-15 minutes in length perform better with the current algorithm, so consider longer-form content in videos.

- Consider uploading a branded thumbnail image for the videos' preview image to be more enticing to users.

Parks Department Channels

Kent County Parks Department Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/KentCountyParks
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 3.3k

Analysis and takeaways:

- Great use of tagging and bringing attention to specific park and golf course Facebook pages.

- Good mix of original content and sharing relevant community posts.

- Perfect use of adding a line of commentary above shares from other pages.

- Nice utilization of emojis to emphasis points in post copy.

- This post is an example of a post using best practices.

- This post could use improvements by tagging mentioned partners and adding line breaks.

Recommendations:

- Avoid tagging self in posts.

- Aim to publish more often - 2-3 timely posts per week.

- Tag media outlets, such as MLive, when sharing their stories and tag partners, such as GVSU, when mentioned for greater visibility.

- Add line breaks in copy for better readability.

- When sharing a link that doesn't populate an image, such as the recent survey, consider having the link only be clickable in the post copy and instead creating a graphic for the image that will stand out and take up more space in users' feed.

Kent County Parks Department Instagram
https://www.instagram.com/kentcountyparks
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 2,546

Analysis and takeaways:

- Exceptional use of a Reel on the October 23 post.

- Instagram best practices used and engagement are both stronger than on the Facebook page.

- Good use of bio description and link in bio.

- This post is an example of a post using best practices.

- This post could use improvements.

Recommendations:

- Avoid using links in post copy as they are not clickable on this platform.

- Aim to publish a post at least once per week.

- Consider adding 2-3 relevant hashtags to the end of each post to become more discoverable.

- Add a location tag to each post.

Parks - Kaufman Golf Course Channels

Kaufman Golf Course Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/KaufmanGolfCourse
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 1,900

Analysis and takeaways:

- Good use of sharing the West Michigan Golf Association page content, which could bring followers from their page to yours.

- This post is an example of a post using best practices.

- This post could use improvements.

    o No need to tell followers what you're going to post on this platform –
    just post it as planned.

Recommendations:

- Too many posts use copy only and should use imagery to take up more real
  estate in users' scroll - this can easily be done with one unique photo or
  video of the course with each post.

- No need to use 'https://' and 'www.' at the start of URLs - keep it short and
  it will still be a clickable link.

- Create and share content that links to the dedicated web page for the
  course.

- Aim to post at least once a week so there is engaging content and not just
  posts where there is incitement weather, a power outage, or a tournament.

- Ensure permission was received by all players involved before scores are
  publicly shared. For example, while congratulating two players, sharing a
  photo of the scorecard may also reveal people's full names and a dismal
  score they may not want shared.

Kaufman Golf Course Instagram
https://www.instagram.com/kaufmangolfcourse
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 326

Analysis and takeaways:

- Great use of common related hashtags mixed into the post copy.

- Good utilization of multiple unique photos in one post.

- Bio is complete.

- Visually pleasing imagery in posts.

- This post is an example of a post using best practices.

- [This post](#) could use improvements.

    - Image should be square to not be cut off on profile page grid and links within post copy are not clickable.

Recommendations:

- Need to post more often as there is no post in the last six months - aim for once a week in-season and bi-weekly off season. Instagram provides a younger audience, who is your next generation of followers and customers.

Kaufman Golf Course X (Twitter)
n/a

Analysis and takeaways:

- Clickable social icon is listed under Kent County social media channels on the website but is no longer an account. Remove icon from [this page](#).

Wabasis Lake Campground Channel

Wabasis Lake Campground Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/wabasis
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 5,100

Analysis and takeaways:

- [This post](#) is an example of one using best practices and getting great engagement.

- [This post](#) is an example of a post that could use improvements.

    - Call-to-action shouldn't say click below if link is to the right.

    - Download and upload the image as a new post instead if you wish to share an older photo instead of sharing your own page's post from two years once more.

Recommendations:

- Engage with those who [mention the page](), by reacting to their posts if positive, or addressing with a comment or direct message if concerning, to reinforce the relationship.

- Do not use gender-specific language like 'Hey guys' so that post copy is inclusive to all followers.

- This would be a great Kent County social channel to share relevant video content on.

Veterans Services Channels

Kent County Veterans Services Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/KentCountyVeteransServices
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 618

Analysis and takeaways:

- Good use of the featured pinned post section.

- It's smart to include a linktr.ee URL or a similar software tool on the "About" page to give people easy access to other KCVS and Kent County content and the opportunity to subscribe to updates.

- Great cadence of sharing relevant content multiple times a week.

- [This post]() is an example of one using best practices and properly tagging another organization for greater post reach.

- [This post]() is an example of a post that could use improvements.

    - Don't share full press releases as an image - link out to where the release lives on the Kent County website.

Recommendations:

- Update navigation settings so that "events" is one of the visible navigation items instead of photos.

- Add a sentence of copy above shared posts from other pages to acknowledge why you endorse or are sharing the content.

- Second guess sharing content from other pages that has graphics in small font or nearly illegible - keep your older audience in mind.

- Take down posts where shared content has been removed by the original publisher.

- Talk with your audience, not to them - ask questions / for opinions in the comments or create a poll.

Kent County Veterans Services X (Twitter)
https://x.com/KentCoVetsSvcs
Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 52

This page has been inactive since April 2022, and we recommend deactivating the page to focus efforts on growing pages on the other platforms.

Kent County Veterans Services Instagram

https://www.instagram.com/kentcountyveteransservices

Followers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 429

Analysis and takeaways:

- This post is an example of one using best practices.

- This post is an example of one that needs the most improvements.

Recommendations:

- Update logo to fit within the designated profile photo circle.

- Use designed graphics with less text (not flyers) and ensure they are square to best fit with this platform.

- Fill out bio

- Write accompanying post copy when sharing an image - the last two posts have no copy.

- Use a location tag in each post for greater visibility to users who don't already follow.

- #KCVS is a broadcast outlet, and the hashtag is more commonly used for that station - suggest creating a hashtag more unique to Kent County Vet Services and using it more often to encourage its use.

- Engage with content you are tagged in from other prominent users and companies.

Kent County Veterans Services YouTube

https://www.youtube.com/@kentcountyveteransservices4187

Subscribers as of Dec. 28, 2023: 14

Recommendations:

- As this page has not been used in more than two years, we recommend closing out the page and sharing Veteran-related videos at least six times per year on the Kent County, MI YouTube page.

AccessKent.com Website Analysis and Recommendations

The team did a light review of AccessKent.com and offers the following high-level observations. As noted earlier, we did not take a deep dive into the site because Kent County has entered a contract with Civic Plus to overhaul the website in 2024.

- Improve navigation on AccessKent.com to have more commonly accessed departments in the top navigation, such as Parks, Public Works and Careers, while streamlining so pages such 'Health Department' don't appear under two dropdowns.

- Update the strategic plan on AccessKent.com's home page to include 2024 plans.

- Survey residents in January and again in December to track changes in overall scores and sentiment of website-related communications, visibility and reputation.

- List open job opportunities on the LinkedIn page jobs section, in addition to on the website, to reach a larger and younger audience of job seekers.

- Separate newsletters and weekly communication from news/press releases on the news release web page so that large announcements don't get buried.

- Place at least one local earned story each quarter highlighting exceptional work from individuals in the County departments, that ultimately includes messaging to strengthen reputation while providing greater visibility.

- Make sure the same Kent County color logo is being used in all instances (variation in example):

Kent County & City of Grand Rapids Receiv
n-Home Lead Hazards

Kent County, Michigan sent this bulletin at 08/23/.

View as

Newsletters

We applaud Kent County for ensuring eNewsletters were a maximized communication channel in 2023.

Overall, from an external view only of the Administrator's Digest, the Health Department monthly newsletter, employment opportunities distribution, and the Board of Commissioners monthly, the newsletters are following current best practices.

They look good and read well with relevant clickable links embedded in copy. They make proper use of left justification of titles and body text, bullets and bolding to emphasize important information, staggered imagery for each article, and clear line separation of sections.

The length and mix of topics are ideal. There is good use of clickable buttons with strong calls-to-action throughout the newsletters and good use of the subscribe button at the bottom of each distribution.

Recommendations:

- Update the social media icons at the end so that the X brand symbol is used instead of the old Twitter bird. This should be reflected both in the bottom of the email and at the bottom of the share function on the web page version.

- Change the subject line to "**Kent County** Administrator's Digest - Date" on future distributions so that it is clearer to users what the information is about and to increase open rates, similar to the Board of Commissioners distribution subject line.

- Avoid using a whole paragraph in italics, such as the "Now Hiring" section in the September Health Department newsletter.

Evaluation & Conclusion

This plan is designed to empower Kent County leaders and team members to discover, bring forth and effectively tell the County's story in a way that is relevant and meaningful to a diverse population, fosters collaborative relationships with partners and stakeholders and provides vital information to the diverse constituency you serve.

Much of what the County seeks to achieve is not entirely quantifiable—brand and relationship building, for instance, are difficult to measure. However, we have included some benchmarks and outcomes to use in evaluating application of the recommendations outlined in this plan.

- Structures, tools and events are implemented and/or are growing to elevate understanding of County programs and services, both internally and externally:
    - Kent County Showcase
    - Quadrant Community Forums
    - Enhanced County storytelling on all communications platforms
    - Increased participation in SOTC
    - Increased newsletter subscriptions
- Structures are in place to increase connectivity between the BOC and staff, between departments, between the County and its stakeholders and between the County and the community:
    - Interdepartmental Communications Task Force
    - Quadrant Community Forums
    - Deputy-level City-County Work Group

- o LUG Communications Council

- o BIPOC Community Council

- Communications staff structure supports enhanced communications across all County departments

    - o Video Production Manager

    - o Communications Managers embedded in assigned departments

- Meaningful collaborations with culturally diverse communities have led to better reach into, engagement with, service to and reflection of an increasingly diverse population:

    - o Expanded multilingual communications

    - o Successful department-level collaborations with BIPOC communities are modeled and replicated across the County organization

    - o Kent County leadership team and staff is more reflective of our diverse community

- Tools are established and consistently implemented to enable the administration to better inform and engage key constituencies and stakeholders:

    - o Improved communications about Board and Committee meetings

    - o Deputy Directors Briefing email

    - o LUG Communications Council

    - o Deputy-level City-County Work Group

    - o BIPOC Community Council

- Tools and practices are in place to enhance frequency, creativity and quality of County storytelling:

    - o "Ladder Up" story and impact sharing

    - o "I Am Kent County" videos

- o Program and services spotlight videos

- o Ambassadors program

- o Integrated Master Content Calendar

- A media training curriculum has been implemented for County spokespersons.

- Best practices are implemented across all County social media platforms.

- Resident surveys reflect improved understanding of Kent County services, heightened satisfaction with County communications, greater reach among new Americans, non-English speakers and historically marginalized communities where they live, and a heightened sense of community and belonging among *all* demographic groups in Kent County.

While the expansive list of recommendations in this plan suggest that Kent County has a long way to go to build strong and effective communications with partners, stakeholders and the community at large, nothing could be further from the truth.

In our conversations and research over the past year, we consistently heard that Kent County is open and transparent, prioritizes communications, has actively been working to open and improve communications channels with all constituencies and is wholly committed to living its brand as a vital partner in serving the people of this community.

Appendix - Research Respondents & Interviewees

Surveys

1. **Kent County Board of Commission Members** - Distributed to all 21 members of the Kent County Board of Commissioners

2. **Local Government Leaders** - Distributed to 49 leaders at 35 local units of government throughout Kent County

3. Kent County **Residents**

   a. Branding Survey - 4,669 respondents

   b. Community Online Survey - Nearly 1,600 respondents

Group and 1:1 Interviews

County Leaders and Teams

Kent County Board of Commissioners **Chair** Stan Stek and Kent County **Administrator** Al Vanderberg

Animal Shelter: Angela Hollingshead

Communications: Steve Kelso, Phil Meade, Dawn Davies

Community Action: Gustavo Perez, Rachel Kunnath, Rachel Ahee, Chad Coffman, Sherrie Gillespie

Emergency Management & Sheriff's Office: Matt Groesser, Scott Corbin, Eric Brunner

Health Department: Dr. Adam London, Dr. Nirali Bora, Christopher Eakin, Christopher Bendekgey, Karla Black, Gail Brink, Brian Hartl, Joann Hoganson, Sara Simmonds

Human Resources: Amy Rollston, Holly Hartley, Darius Quinn, Stephanie Hernandez, Michelle Balcom

Parks: Dan DeLooff, Josh Mattice, Cori VanderHart, Jeanette Krause

Veterans Services: Martha Burkett, Ryan Grams, Rachel Wustman

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Essential Needs Task Force: Wende Randall, Director

Frey Foundation: Holly Johnson, President

Hispanic Center of West Michigan: Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez, Executive Director

Kent County Disability Advocates: Dave Bulkowski, Executive Director

Kent ISD: Ron Koehler, Superintendent

The Right Place: Tim Mroz, Sr. VP of Strategic Initiatives

West Michigan Asian American Association: Minnie Morey, Executive Director, and Bing Goei, founding member and immediate past chair, Asian Pacific American Chamber

LOCAL UNITS OF GOVERNMENT

Ada Township: Ross Leisman, Township Supervisor, and Julius Suchy, Township Manager

City of Grand Rapids: Doug Matthews, Assistant City Manager, and David Green, Director of Communications

Sparta: Jim Lower, Village Manager