

Engaging Activist Communities

Galloway C*

Monash University, Gippsland, Australia

Abstract

In the normal run of local government, efforts to engage the community in decision-making can encompass a wide range of day-to-day activities, from inviting submissions about revamping a city library to seeking citizen input on a strategic plan. Yet from time to time, controversial issues arise which demand more than conventional approaches to community engagement. Such issues see the formation of 'activist communities' within the larger community. These groups insist either that certain types of actions be taken — or, in some cases, not be taken. They are prepared to take dramatic steps if required in pursuit of their agendas.

In these cases new approaches to engagement may be required if local authorities have a goal of operating in a participative manner. Successful implementation of these approaches requires prior planning, including environmental scanning which helps identify at an early stage issues that may lead to the formation of activist communities. The planning should involve discussion and agreement on the roles and responsibilities of local government leaders in engaging with activist communities. It should be based on an understanding of public relations as helping to negotiate the relationship between an organisation and its publics. The outcome of engaging with activist communities may not be a consensus on the issue in contention, as this may be unrealistic. It should, however, be a perception by activist communities that their engagement with local government has been handled appropriately.

Keywords

Activist, public relations, issues management, boundary-spanning

Introduction

This paper aims to highlight a research agenda rather than to explore questions of community activism and engagement in detail. In examining local authorities' engagement with activists, it advances discussion of a topic that will "touch a chord with a lot of councils" (P Fitz 2005, pers. comm., 6 April). The paper suggests that the public relations discipline of issues management can be recruited to help local governments identify and develop strategies for dealing with issues before they prompt an activist reaction. It can also illuminate the process by which publics coalesce into activist communities and help guide appropriate responses. In contrast to disputes, which can be private, "issues involve disagreements that occur in public.

Issues often are debated by the population at large, covered by the news media, and addressed by government” (Hallahan 2001, p. 28).

New frameworks

Many (but not all) local governments operate a range of mechanisms designed to facilitate engagement with the community — defined as the people they are responsible for in a particular geography. These mechanisms, such as community forums or town meetings, formal consultation processes and community surveys, may be considered more or less successful by the people involved with them. They are, however, at least familiar, a recognised part of the way the local government concerned does business. Yet such mechanisms may fall short when contentious issues arise — for example, when activists seek to avoid the processes or perceive the mechanisms to be operating asymmetrically. In such cases the local authority may need to create a new framework for debate, especially if groups concerned about the issue move from advocacy of their viewpoint to activism.

When an issue is on the boil, falling back on familiar policies and procedures may be interpreted as stonewalling or an unwillingness to engage with 'activist communities' who are pressing for change. Such perceptions are likely to undermine the potential for dialogue and collaborative problem-solving and may have a long-term impact on the authority's reputation, if the community at large forms an unfavourable view of the way the issue is being handled. As Robinson noted, “Perhaps local government's relative inflexibility is the fundamental cause of its most fatal flaw — the rupture of its relationship with its citizens. And retreating into the seemingly safe role of remote, insulated service corporation is not a long term solution to this failure” (Robinson 2002, p. 8).

Activists' challenges to local government may call into question the legitimacy as well as the practicality and desirability of particular policies. Not all councils will be as confident as the Moreland City Council in Melbourne, which for many years has made free office space available to groups opposed to some of the council's directions (P Fitz 2005, pers. comm., 6 April). Yet there are alternatives to defensive reactions to activist pressure. The discipline of public relations offers useful insights for local government staff wanting to manage issues effectively. This does not mean the outcome will always be consensus. It does mean that activists should be able to consider that their involvement with the local authority has been handled in an appropriate, inclusive and open manner.

Advocacy and activism

This paper differentiates between advocacy and activism — just as Melbourne-based Victoria University does in offering its innovative qualifications in Public Advocacy and Action: *Graduate Certificate — Public Policy and Action*. Advocacy is “The act of pleading or arguing in favour of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy; active support” (*Advocacy*). Activists

go further than argument to demand action. They seek implementation of change and are prepared to take direct, confrontational steps — such as storming council offices or meetings — to that end. Adapting Munro's description of animal rights activists, they may seek to stigmatise 'legitimate' practices as social problems that require a social solution. In problematising activities that are taken for granted by most people, they seek to change the way people think, challenging orthodoxies that underpin attitudes (Munro 2005, p. 3). Activists may be a minority (Munro 2005, p. 7) but a disturbing one. Even small pressure groups have brought giant corporations to their knees (Mintzber 1983 cited in Anderson 1992). Activists seek to act 'in the streets' while advocates prefer to be 'in the suites' (Munro 2005, p. 7). Local governments will probably have to deal with the latter much more than the former — but it is activists' intention to disturb the status quo that calls for more flexible means of engagement than established procedures may allow.

Many activists are concerned about issues such as commercial corporate behaviour, including the way corporations treat the physical environment. Their concerns are partly reflected in a growing social consensus that organisations should demonstrate 'corporate social responsibility' — an awareness of and sensitivity to the social-economic as well as the physical environment (Jones and Chase 1979 cited in Anderson 1992). Governments are not immune to this call for a type of accountability that goes beyond questions of efficiency — such as whether public money is being well spent — to issues of whether government policy will enhance or detract from the social as well as the physical fabric of a community. Such issues - urban planning decisions are one example — may attract both advocates and activists. What sparks the formation of activist communities?

According to the 'situational theory' developed by public relations scholar James Grunig (Anderson 1992, p. 152), organisations deal with a range of publics whose activity (or lack of it) is situation-dependent. Some are simply latent, uninvolved in what the organisation is doing on a day-by-day basis. They become activated when they recognise something as problematic, believe they can do something about it and decide to become involved. A problem focus has long been associated with the idea of a public: as long ago as 1927, Dewey defined a public as a group whose members face a problem, recognise it and organise to take action (Hallahan 2001, p. 29). More recent understandings of public have adopted the simpler concept of a group with which an organisation wants to build a relationship (Hallahan 2001, p. 29).

Activist tactics

In the local government case, members of an active public may adopt activist tactics if they perceive the government concerned to be unresponsive to their representations, to a degree they believe may lead to unacceptable risk to the community. In western Sydney, a group of residents had been campaigning for years against proposals to develop large-scale housing

and industry on federal land in their area that was a haven for wildlife. Finding that lobbying had not produced a result, they began discussing “public protests including meetings, marches, pickets and blockades if need be” (Harris and Dickinson n.d.). Activism may focus on other quality-of-life issues such access to child care. For example, the Australian Community Child Care Association has provided advice and resources to parent activists lobbying councils to stay in the business of delivering child care *Community Child Care Association Policy and Advocacy* (2004). Activist groups often set the agenda for issues debate (Anderson 1992): governments no less than business can face a choice of taking action or being left to defend a position on ground defined by the activists (Jones and Chase 1979, pp. 10-11 cited in Anderson 1992).

Anderson’s perspective on what business needs to do also applies to governments:

“For business, the challenge of the 1990s will be to assess the impact of short- and long-term plans on the socio-economic environment. For public relations practitioners, meeting the challenge will require developing sensitivity to what activists are doing and what they plan to do. It will require learning to identify activist publics before they become active and developing communication strategies to foster mutual understanding with them” (1992, p. 152).

If they are not to be seen as merely seeking to defend the status quo or to minimise changes to it, governments need to understand how issues emerge and how they might be managed. A number of writers have contributed to an issue life-cycle theory which holds that issues evolve through a limited number of stages, often three, such as Buchholz’ model of public opinion formation, public policy formulation and public policy implementation. As Zyglidopoulos states:

“Most [issues life cycle] theorists agree that issues evolve from a period of societal or corporate insignificance, through a period of increased attention, conflict and awareness, to a period where new solutions and routines concerning the issue get institutionalised within the society and/or the organization” (2003, p. 72).

In line with this theory, Hallahan (2001) discusses how individuals and groups move from inactivity to activism, using a “five publics model” based on people’s level of knowledge and involvement (Hallahan 2001, p. 34). He defines active publics as individuals and groups with high levels of knowledge and involvement in a topic; such knowledge and involvement are “necessary conditions for activism” (Hallahan 2001, p.34). Aroused publics have high involvement but low knowledge and “include people who have recognized a potential problem or issue but are not prepared to move into an activist role”. They may, however, become followers of activist leaders (Hallahan 2001, p. 34). Other categories of public who are not involved in a particular topic are aware publics, inactive publics and nonpublics — individuals or groups with no knowledge or involvement (Hallahan 2001, pp. 34-5).

According to Hallahan, there are four distinct stages in the transformation of people from inactivity to activism. What he calls issue activation (Hallahan 2001, p. 36) begins when people recognise a problem as a result of comparing their experience with their expectations. Hallahan notes that:

“Most problems result from a person’s perception of underperformance by an organization, based on promises, past experience, or a comparison of an organization’s performance with that of others. Problems can also arise when the performance of an organization, product, service, candidate or cause appears to be incompatible with generally accepted cultural values and norms” (2001, p. 37).

A second stage is that members of inactive publics become aroused, perhaps through exposure to other people who see an issue as problematic, to media publicity or possibly advertising. In a third stage, aroused publics become active, organising to seek solutions. Hallahan notes that not all members of aroused publics become active. Organising is critical in “transforming the merely aroused to the higher state of activism” (Hallahan 2001, p. 39). Finally, otherwise uninvolved publics become aware of issues and might become active (Hallahan 2001, p. 40). According to Hallahan, in general, aware publics intervene in problem situations only when activist initiatives have already been undertaken (2001, p. 41).

What should a government confronted with activism do? The challenge should not be underestimated. A public relations researcher has found that “the typical relationship with activists tends to be quite hostile across [all] organisational types” (Grunig 1987, p. 52 cited in Murphy and Dee 1993). Reaching some kind of closure with activists can be difficult (Hainsworth 1990 cited in Murphy and Dee 1992) — their decision to engage in forms of direct action can make them less open to negotiation: the game they play is more likely to be a zero-sum one. It is tempting to conclude that establishing dialogue is the answer, that communication processes will themselves produce an outcome the parties can at least live with. It is assumed that all that is needed is better communication. There is indeed evidence that two-way communication between organisations and activist groups can de-escalate conflicts (Anderson 1992 and Major 1993 cited in Murphy and Dee 1996). However, writing about conflicts between corporations and environmental activists (who also often form one of the activist communities with which governments must deal), Murphy and Dee note that “even though lack of communication will almost certainly hurt, communication itself does not necessarily help” (1996). Activists can use public hearings as means of strengthening their cause (Gerlach 1986 cited in Murphy and Dee 1996) and conflict theorists have concluded that in some situations, refusal to communicate may be an effective strategy (Murphy and Dee 1996). Any approach to activist groups must, however, recognise that they “face some of the same challenges as do other organisations. They strategically use communication to achieve those goals” (Smith and Ferguson 2001 cited in Kent et al. 2003, p. 66), including public relations approaches.

Power relations

This strategic use of communication reflects the fact that formation of a public can be seen as more than merely situational: according to Chay-Nemeth, a public may be viewed as an “historical and political effect” (2001, p. 128). In other words, formation of public results from political processes and communication is a practice of power relations as well as about information exchange (Chay-Nemeth 2001, p. 128). In this light, the birth of activist communities may be prompted directly by policy development and implementation. Governments’ interactions with activists are political enactments, often conditioned by activist communities’ attempts to redress power disparities by tactics such as using new media technologies: as Taylor et al. point out, “At the most basic level, the presence of activist organizations on the Internet gives them equality in status to corporations” (2001, p. 280).

Recognising the political nature of dealing with activists, local governments may seek to channel their demands into established consultation and participation processes. But as Anderson notes, pressure campaigns are irregular and ad hoc, can involve inconsistent demands, are based on confrontation not co-operation and assume the organisation must be forced to change against its will. Often it is unclear how the organisation should respond (Mintzberg 1983 cited in Anderson 1992), especially as existing citizen participation processes may be based on the assumption of rational debate, while activist campaigns may gain much of their impetus from emotional as well as rational elements. For example, in Melbourne, council deliberations about the Victorian State Government’s vision for the future of Melbourne and its implications for urban housing density have led to heated representations from residents, to the extent that meeting agendas were thrown around a council chamber (P Fitz 2005, pers. comm., 6 April). This emotional dimension may be particularly challenging to governments whose policy inclinations are primarily analytical and conservative: Murphy and Dee note that the approach any organisation takes to social issues is determined by its internal culture. Mintzberg argued that change could occur more effectively if organisational managers took the initiative before pressure campaigns began (Mintzberg 1983 cited in Anderson 1992). Doing so is the province of issues management, a discipline especially associated with public relations.

Environmental scanning

Taylor et al. (2003) argue that all organisations attempt to maximise their outcomes. In the case of a local government, these outcomes may include freedom of movement to implement a strategic plan, achieve planned service levels, or secure broad community agreement for a particular policy. According to Taylor et al., “organizations are most effective at maximizing their interests when they listen to their publics and anticipate and adapt to public needs” (2003, p. 260). Anticipation is enabled by environmental scanning — monitoring signals from the socio-economic-political environment for nascent trends or developments that may affect

the organisation's ability to fulfil its mission. Scanning can be undertaken by media content analysis, by tracking resident or constituent complaints and submissions and, less formally, by monitoring issues being raised with elected representatives. In this way, issues management can serve as an early warning system and provide raw material for organisational decision-making and adjustment (Taylor et al. 2003). It will, however, only be effective if it is done systematically and the results are interpolated into decision-making in a planned way, such as through the provision of regular reports. Once an issue is identified, significance can be attached to it (Taylor et al. 2003) and policy implications considered. This does not mean immediate action is called for: "Issues are not necessarily ready for a decision. Issues, instead, have a status that indicates their level of importance at any one point in time" (Taylor et al. 2003, p. 259).

Once the level of importance has been attached to an emerging issue, a strategy can be developed to track and respond to it. This includes making an assessment of whether it is likely to prompt the creation of an active public that might move to activism. According to research on the situational theory of publics, an organisation seeking to identify and communicate with relevant publics should worry about educated activists and devote most of its efforts to communicating with them; if the organisation does not present its point of view, activists will seek it elsewhere (Anderson 1992). This is not an argument for a government to ignore the bulk of the citizens for which it is responsible. Rather, it highlights the fact that by dint of their insistent demands, activists can consume a disproportionate amount of an organisation's communication resources. According to Grunig and Hunt (1984 cited in Anderson 1992) issues managers should seek to communicate with an aware public before it moves into active opposition to the organisation. In Grunig's view, this communication should be two-way, for reasons including organisations learning the consequences of what they are doing on all their relevant publics and so that organisations can tell the public what they are doing about negative consequences (Grunig 1986 cited in Anderson 1992). The aim should be creation of mutual understanding; this need not involve either giving in to activist pressure or activists fundamentally altering their positions (Anderson 1992, p. 163).

As they confront activist publicity, local government issues managers need to be aware of its limits as well as the potential power it may exert. For example, American research on letters to the editor as a forum for public deliberation found that activist publicity is "a distinct mode of discourse that is easily recognized by the 'gatekeepers' of the public forum of letters to the editor, and one that is suppressed because it fails to meet their normative visions" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001, p. 308). Wahl-Jorgensen found that while on the one hand many editors were sympathetic to activists' political goals, they were also wary of what they saw as "the manipulative discourse of activism" (2001, p. 310), viewing it as inauthentic (2001, p. 312). This is of more than passing importance to a council, considering the value of local newspapers in informing citizens about the council's activities. For example, recent research

by Moreland City Council illustrated below shows that in that authority's jurisdiction, the local paper is a key information source. Including the council's own regular advertisement in the paper, *The Moreland City News* was a primary means of information about council activities for 70 per cent of those residents participating in an independent survey. Wahl-Jorgensen's research discovered that editors were even suspicious of activist publicity because it was the result of collective action rather than individual expression (2001, p. 313).

As governments confront activist publicity and tactics, they may seek to adopt bargaining and negotiating techniques, such as seeking to invent options for mutual gain (Fisher and Udy 1981 cited in Murphy and Dee 1996). According to Vasquez, bargaining and negotiation may be viewed as communication phenomena (1996, p. 1). Vasquez advances the idea of what he calls "issue development public relations [as] a management process of negotiating the organization-public relationship" (1996, p. 1). In doing so he moves beyond the ideal of symmetrical two-way communication facilitating dialogue between and organisation and publics (Vasquez 1996) which has been very influential in the public relations literature.¹ He does this on the basis of viewing public relations practitioners as "boundary-spanners", or people who span the boundary between the organisation and its environment, able both to relay signals from the environment to the organisation and to connect key publics with organisational viewpoints. Boundary spanners facilitate transactions between the two and seek "to obtain social support and legitimacy for the organization" (Vasquez 1996, p. 70). Vasquez is particularly interested in the information processing perspective practitioners can use to monitor organisational environments. From this perspective, the environment is composed of information the organisation must extract, process and act on, focusing on "the processes through which the environment influences an organization's structure and processes, especially its communication" (Huber and Daft 1987, p. 132 cited in Vasquez 1996, p. 70). Organisational members then build perceptions about "what will happen in the environment or why did something happen" (Huber and Daft 1987, p. 133 cited in Vasquez 1996, p. 70).

According to Vasquez, using the information processing perspective, public relations professionals engage in:

- information assembling — defining and transforming organisational materials and information for consumption by key publics. This is about constructing "frames of information" for these publics.
- information promotion — making the organisational frames of information known to key publics

¹ Since its original articulation by Grunig (1984, 1989) the idea that organisations and practitioners have mixed motives — wanting both to forward their own interest and to reach a solution acceptable to a public and society as a whole — seems to have been incorporated into the symmetrical model (Vasquez 1996, p. 65)

- information consuming — through environmental scanning and probing, either before information assembling to determine information content or after information promotion to determine effects and gain feedback (Vasquez 1996, pp. 71-2).

Vasquez sees the repetition of these processes over time, as having the effect of “defining and ... redefining organizational values, issues and images to key publics and vice versa” (1996, p. 72). In this way, public relations activities can be viewed as attempts to negotiate the organisation-public relationship. Hallahan (2001) agrees that how issues arise and are responded to by organisations and others is a “central concern” of public relations. Public relations, then, may involve itself with helping local authorities engage with activist communities. Activism can stretch a council’s existing systems to breaking point, putting relationships between elected officials and staff under pressure. Communications staff who may be trained, for example, in effective media relations, are confronted with elected officials who take their viewpoint directly to the media, more concerned with their prospects at the next election than with the niceties of a policy (where one exists) covering who should talk to the media and in what circumstances. If they have no experience in dealing with activist publicity, councillors may be more inclined to resist it or stonewall than engage it on its own ground. Such publicity may reflect the frustration of activists who have given up on established procedures designed to encourage participation because they are not delivering a desired result. Activists like these may seek actively to circumvent existing procedures by stirring public opinion so it reaches a “tipping point” (Gladwell 2002), creating a movement for change governments will regard as irresistible.

There are several ways in which boundary-spanning public relations practitioners can be useful, especially when activists refuse to use established communications and consultation procedures. They are:

1. Facilitating opportunities for direct, unmediated contact between the parties even if this is outside existing procedures. In one case involving a corporation under attack by an environmental group, the attacks ceased after a group representative visited the company’s operations (Anderson 1992). An example of setting up direct contact would be the establishment of a community commission including activists to explore options for dealing with a contentious issue, rather than allocating activists a subordinate, even supplicant role. Recognising that it is “much easier to state an ideology than to accept its practical implications” (Murphy and Dee 1996, p. 30), such co-exploratory work might enabling both sides to construct creative and practicable strategies.

Writing about environmental activists and corporate policymakers, Murphy and Dee advised that “neither side should give excessive credence to the rhetorical stance of the other”. Reinforcing the fundamental principle of public relations that an organisation’s stated policies must be aligned with its behaviour, they suggest that:

“Public relations managers should vigilantly assure that decisions taken by their organizations truly reflect public statement about values — and just as vigilantly demand consistency from their activist audiences” (1996, p. 29).

“Such mutual accountability might best occur in a working environment that reflects diversity of views but is focused not on who gets what but on “whose solution to our problem is best?” (Hammond 1973 cited in Murphy and Dee 1996, p. 10).

2. Working to make established communication and consultation procedures more flexible so activists do not feel forced to resort to more extreme tactics. For example, meetings of the Moreland City Council include an opportunity for any member of the public to ask questions. The question time continues until everyone has asked their question. If answers are not available at the time of the meeting they are included in the minutes of the next meeting (P Fitz 2005, pers. comm, 7 April).
3. By not only framing local government positions in ways that will help members of activist communities to understand them but also by framing activist positions so council staff and elected representatives understand these oppositional stances. This activity may not result in agreement but it may increase the chances of finding one and the likelihood that activists perceive governments are treating them appropriately. This framing work includes framing messages for the media.
4. By helping local authorities develop formal environmental scanning procedures and issues management planning. An issues management plan not only provides for tracking an issue’s development but also allocates responsibilities and resources for dealing with it — so that, ideally, it may reach resolution before an active public coalesces around it. Such a plan not only identifies publics who may become involved but also takes account of others who may not become involved but whose opinions may be influenced in ways that might affect the organisation’s reputation.

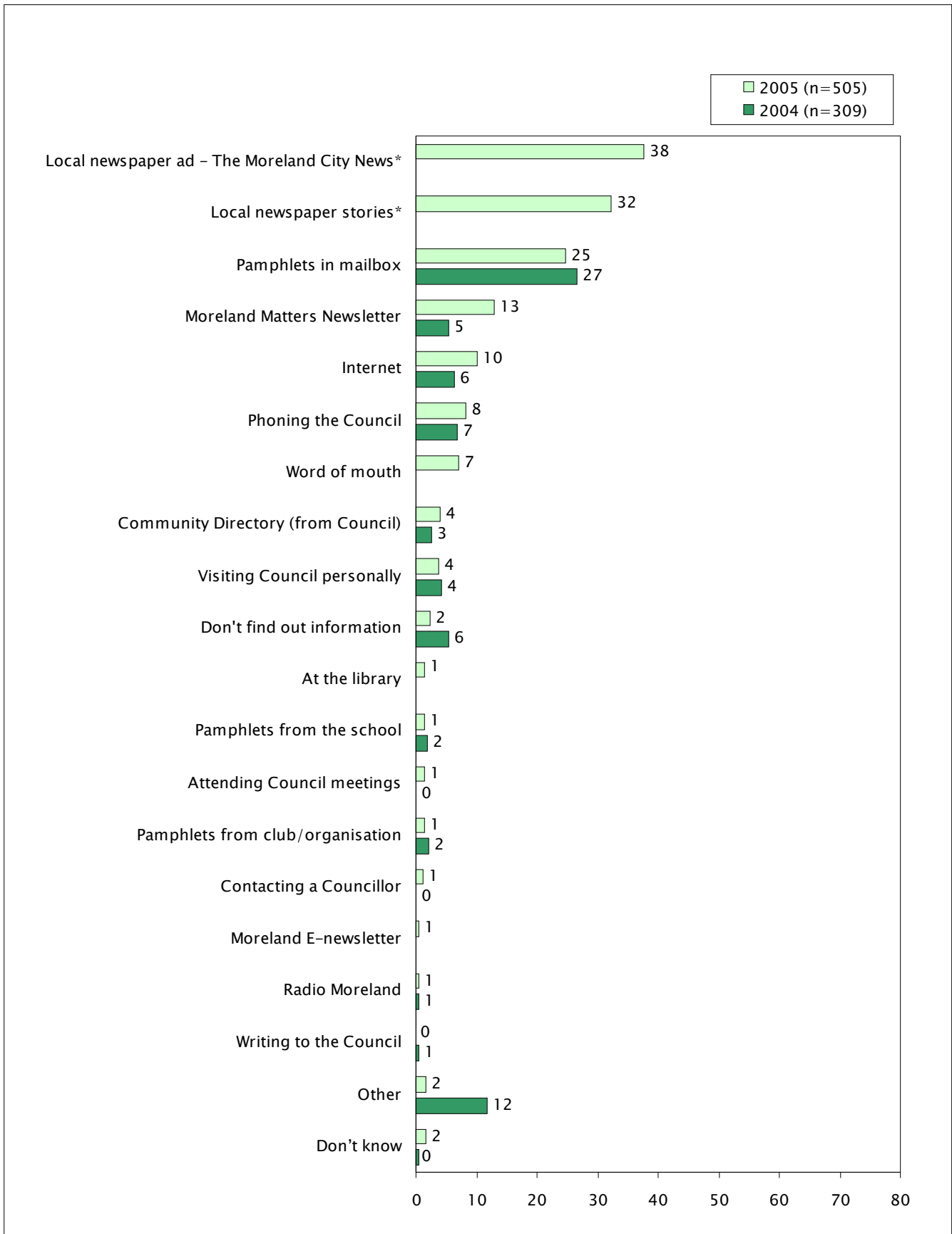
Moving in the direction suggested here involves reaching past 'tell-and-sell' approaches to communication, which Benest describes as local government agencies trying to sell a decision after they have made it, “often with little success and much negative reaction and mistrust in the decision-making process” (Benest 1996, p. 4). Reflecting the idea of community commissions on contentious issues, Benest notes that in the California city of Brea, 125 'community designers' were engaged to create a vision for the new downtown (Benest 1996, p. 5).

Controversially, perhaps, Benest argues that the core business of localities is solving problems rather than delivering services:

“Providing services is a good role for local government, but it is only one aspect of a total problem-solving approach that must engage citizens to be effective...Rather than relieving people of their civic responsibilities, government leaders need to stimulate

public discourse about concerns and to encourage brainstorming about alternative solutions” (1996, p. 8).

Local governments that have the confidence to adopt this stance, using public relations staff to facilitate two-way communication with community publics, identifying and developing strategies to address issues in their formative stage rather than when they are full-blown foci of community activism, may find they are able to build constructive dialogic relations that minimise the potential for activist confrontations. As Taylor et al. point out, “Engagement, as a philosophical and pragmatic framework, seeks to overcome alienation, foster communication and stimulate reform ... An engagement approach to issues management advocates that active dialogue between an organization and its publics is the most effective way to manage issues” (2003, p. 260).



CURRENT INFORMATION ABOUT COUNCIL, L“Q.24A How do you currently find out about the Council and Council activities?” © Moreland City Council 2005

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