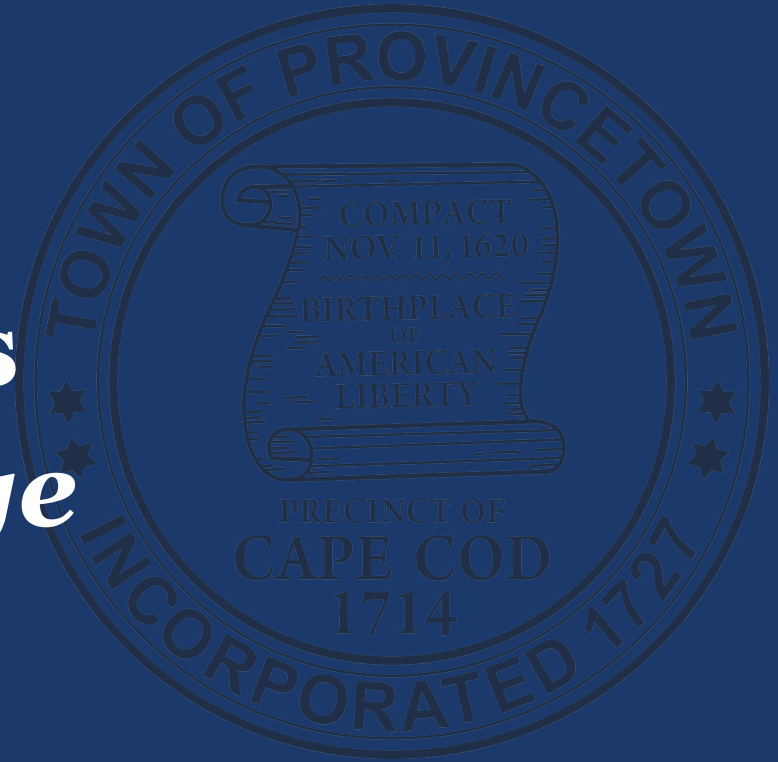


TOWN OF PROVINCETOWN

# Municipal Communications *in the Age of Rage*

*Best Practices for Local Government*



May 8, 2026

# A Little About Me



*15 years of municipal government communications experience*

- Started career as the first civilian Public Information Officer for the Cambridge Police Department in 2010 after the infamous “Beer Summit.”
- Have led communications in Cambridge (120,000 residents) and Provincetown (3,600 residents) on complex local issues including public safety, housing, infrastructure, Town Meeting – and everything in between – by translating technical policy and financial topics as well as emotional issues into clear public messaging.
- Coordinated public information during major operational events and emergencies, including severe weather response and municipal shelter operations, the Boston Marathon Bombing and manhunt, and more.
- Developed multi-channel communications strategies (web, social, alerts, press releases, and Board materials) to improve transparency and resident engagement.

*I've seen it all, from big to small.*



## 2 The New Reality

*Local government communications have fundamentally changed*

- The decline of local newspapers has left an information vacuum
- Social media now fills that void – often with misinformation, half-truths, and outrage
- Residents increasingly get news from Facebook posts, group texts, and screenshots, often missing important details and context
- Silence or slow response from Town Hall is often filled by speculation

***If the Town doesn't tell its story clearly and quickly, someone else will – inaccurately.***



# 3 Why This Matters

*Misinformation has real consequences*

- Undermines trust in local government
- Escalates routine issues into crises
- Increases staff burnout and public hostility
- Makes decision-making harder for boards and officials
- Makes it more difficult to recruit residents to serve on boards/committees, get good candidates to run for office, etc. due to the negativity/voracity of criticism on social media

***Good communication is now a core public service — not a "nice to have."***



# 4 The Town Is Now the Primary News Source

*Whether we like it or not*

- Press releases often go unread or unprinted
- Social media posts are shared more widely than official notices
- Residents expect direct, timely, plain-language communication
- Town websites, email alerts, and social media must work together

***Key shift: Municipalities must communicate like publishers, not just administrators.***



# Best Practice #1: Be Proactive, Not Reactive

*Get ahead of the narrative*

- Share information before rumors start
- Explain decisions early – not just final votes
- Preview impacts: "What does this mean for you?"
- Answer predictable questions upfront in the communication

*Proactive communication reduces outrage before it ignites.*



## Best Practice #2: Use Plain Language

*Clarity beats completeness*

- Avoid acronyms, jargon, and insider language
- Write at an 8th-grade reading level
- Use bullets, headers, and short paragraphs
- Say what you know — and what you don't (yet)

*If people don't understand it, they won't trust it.*



# Best Practice #3: Meet People Where They Are

*One message, multiple channels*

- Town website = source of truth
- Email/text alerts = urgency and reach
- Social media = visibility and shareability
- In-person meetings = trust, context, and direct feedback

***Don't rely on one platform — redundancy is strength.***



## Best Practice #4: Address Misinformation

*Correct calmly, clearly, and publicly*

- Don't repeat false claims verbatim
- Lead with facts, not defensiveness
- Use phrases like "We've seen questions about..." or "To clarify..." or "Did you know..."
- Redirect the discussion back to official Town channels
- Link back to official information on the Town website

*You don't have to win arguments — just establish facts.*



# Best Practice #5: Tone Matters

*People read tone before content*

- Be respectful, even when criticism isn't
- Avoid sarcasm, blame, or legalistic language
- Acknowledge frustration before explaining policy
- Remember: most residents want to be heard, not fought

*Calm, consistent tone builds credibility over time.*



# Best Practice #6: Support Staff & Elected Officials

*Communications is a team effort*

- Provide context and details to boards and staff ahead of time
- Align messaging across departments
- Establish who responds and where – and who shouldn't
- Normalize stepping away from online conflict

*Protecting staff morale is part of good governance.*



# Best Practice #7: Communications & Operations

*Communicators need access to the decision-makers*

- Communications and operations have to be integrated
- Effective municipal messaging starts with understanding how decisions are actually made and implemented—not just how they’re announced
- A siloed communications role isn’t enough
- Communications needs to be embedded in the organization and its culture to translate policy and operations accurately
- Communications staff should be “in the room” during key discussions, not brought in afterward
- A strong municipal communicator must be able to ask questions from residents’ perspectives, pressure-test assumptions, and flag where plans may be confusing or misunderstood

*Communications can’t be siloed.*



## Best Practice #8: Focus on the 80%

*Communications can't reach (or please) everyone*

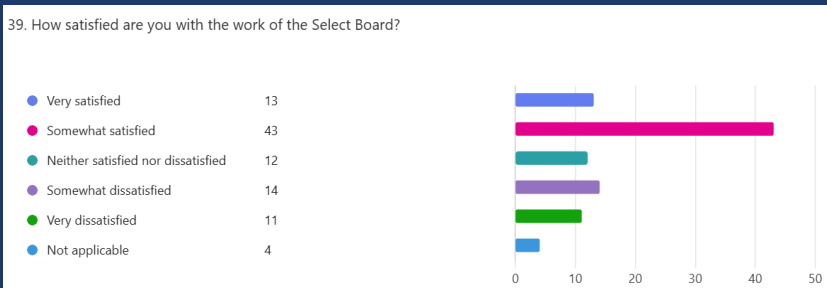
- Early in my career, my mentor taught me to “focus on the 80%”
- In every community, there will be about 10% who support nearly everything and 10% who oppose nearly everything—communications shouldn't be built primarily around either group, it should focus on the 80% in the middle
- The goal is to provide clear, factual, and timely information that helps the majority of residents feel informed and confident in how decisions are being made
- Prioritizing the middle builds trust, stability, and credibility over time, even on complex or controversial issues
- When the 80% understand the plan, the process, and the tradeoffs, municipal decision-making becomes easier to explain—and easier for the community to support

***Prioritize the middle and not the extremes.***

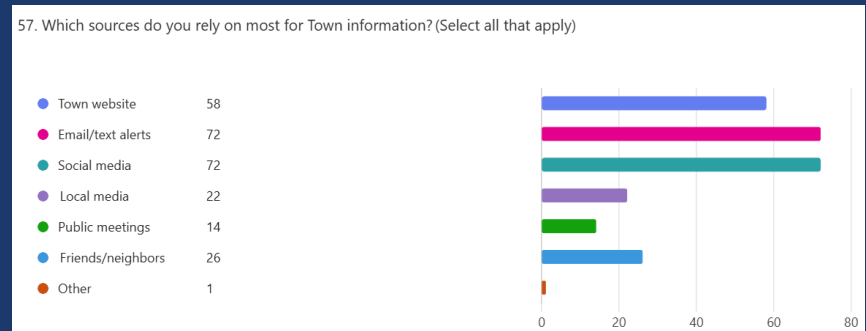
# Direct Feedback

## Current Resident Satisfaction Survey results

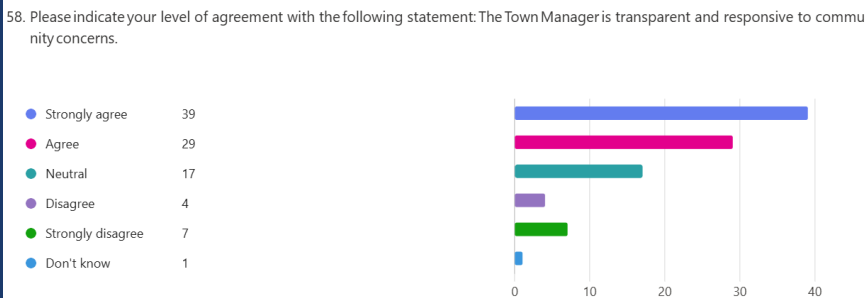
**57% Very or Somewhat Satisfied with BOS.**



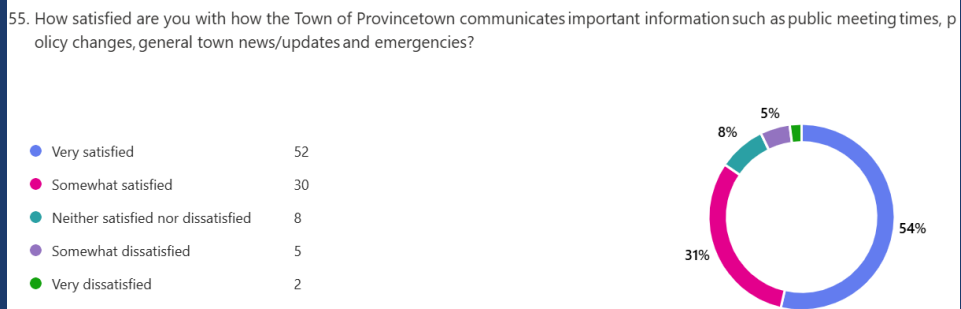
**22% get Town Info from Town website.**  
**27% get Town info from Email/Text Alerts.**  
**27% get Town Info from Social Media.**



**70% Strongly Agree or Agree TM is Responsive & Transparent to community concerns.**



**85% Very or Somewhat Satisfied with how the Town Communicates important info.**



# Final Takeaways

*in the Age of Rage...*



Speed matters, but accuracy matters more



Silence creates space for misinformation



Clear, human communication builds trust



Towns can and must anchor the conversation

*Good municipal communication won't eliminate anger — but it can prevent chaos.*

# Questions?

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