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| Agency Name | New Hampshire Department of Revenue Administration |
| Name your program, idea, or project: | New Hampshire’s Strategic Approach to Public Outreach |
| What is the problem that you wanted to solve? | With a mission to fairly and efficiently administer the tax laws of the State, the New Hampshire Department of Revenue Administration (NHDRA) is committed to transparency and openness. Despite this commitment, NHDRA faced challenges when communicating information to its key stakeholders.  Substantial internal successes went unnoticed. Emails were deployed to an unknown list of subscribers. Important Technical Information Releases (TIRs) were posted on a website with little fanfare.  The year was 2018 and, without a dedicated Public Information Officer (PIO) on staff, NHDRA found itself in need of strategic communications support. What did that mean? We didn’t necessarily know at the time. The need was brought to light several years ago when the State’s budget was relying on a tax amnesty program to raise significant revenue in the span of a few short months.  It was then that we engaged local advertising and public relations experts to create a public outreach strategy that generated awareness specifically for the tax amnesty program. Elements of the program included the following: Developing an integrated campaign that targeted the largest segments of the Tax Amnesty Program participant population through a mix of earned media (web, print, TV and radio) and direct-to-taxpayer efforts; Leveraging knowledge of Google search and “click ad” advertising to draw potential Tax Amnesty candidates to the program via the Internet; Identifying key interest groups (chambers of commerce, local associations) and conducting outreach to secure placement in e-newsletters and on websites; and, Drafting and distributing press releases announcing the Tax Amnesty Program launch and last-chance opportunity, paired with aggressive media relations follow-up and participation in interviews.  So what was our result? The legislature budgeted $16 million for Tax Amnesty and we brought in $19 million from Tax Amnesty during the 2.5-month program. Once the program concluded, we began to wonder what else we could achieve with additional marketing and communications efforts, which brings us back to 2018.  With no communications staff and minimal budget, NHDRA was in need of a firm to undertake a comprehensive communications assessment, and deliver and implement a plan to improve its communications effectiveness on an ongoing basis, beyond the specific amnesty initiative. |
| How did you go about finding a solution? | Having experienced the success of our recent tax amnesty program, we engaged the same public relations firm, Montagne Communications, for guidance. Montagne recommended a “communications audit” (the irony was not lost on us) of our existing forms of public outreach to determine a strategy moving forward. The audit included the following elements: Stakeholder interviews – anonymous conversations with taxpayers and tax practitioners about perception;  Comprehensive website evaluation for readability and ease of use; and,  Work product review – Assessment of all written product for readability and effectiveness (technical information releases, press releases, presentations, trainings, fliers, notification, reports and more). The in-depth audit took approximately six months to complete. At the conclusion, we received a comprehensive report that included valuable insight from key audience groups, suggestions for website improvements, suggestions for enhancing existing written content, and opportunities for public outreach in the future.  In order to achieve our mission of fairly and efficiently administering the State’s tax laws, we need to communicate clearly with our constituents about what is expected of them and what resources are available to support them. |
| Describe the outcome. What is the new idea, approach, program, or activity? | Based on the audit, the following recommendations were made: Develop a targeted list of key statewide stakeholders and influencers to target communication (local and regional media, local associations, chambers of commerce, practitioners and more);  Develop an email communications program specific to our most resistant group of taxpayers (taxpayers of the Meals & Rentals Tax);  Develop a public outreach calendar and target 2-3 proactive outreach initiatives per quarter (legislative session update, expert perspective on a topic of interest, criminal cases, tax season tips, and more); and,  Publish and proactively pitch relevant press releases about our work, intended for the general public to consume.  Once the recommendations were reviewed, we developed a communications calendar for 2018, allowing us to plan ahead for initiatives. Additionally, we created a status report to track progress and next steps on current and near-term activities. We connected weekly by phone with Montagne to talk through the status report, and we added items from the 2018 calendar as they approached. |
| What has changed since this was implemented? How have your operations improved? Include any data, analytics or metrics that would show the value of your program. Don't forget management advantages such as improved morale. | One of the key recommendations was to create an email outreach program for our Meals & Rentals operators. This is a constituency that interacts with us regularly due to their obligation to file monthly. This is also a constituency that has a very low voluntary compliance rate. Therefore, our plan was to reach out more frequently to these M&R operators via email to encourage voluntary compliance. We found we did not have sufficient contact information for many of our operators, so we launched a mailing campaign in hopes of collecting email contact information for future initiatives.  We invited folks to send us an email with feedback on how they would like to have improved interactions with NHDRA, which served a dual purpose. We got the feedback (reinforcing the fact that we are there to support taxpayers) and we also got their email address to enroll them in updates. We have since been able to use these emails to contact M&R operators about training opportunities and, most recently, the launch of a new technology project that directly benefits this group.  Following recommendations for proactive media relations efforts, we distributed eight press releases in 2018, highlighting the following NHDRA achievements and taxpayer opportunities: First Female Commissioner; Top 10 Filing Tips for New Hampshire Taxpayers; New Assistant Commissioner; Potential Impact of Federal Tax Reform on BPT Taxpayers; Property Tax Relief Program; Reference Guide of 2018 Tax Changes; Annual Report Reveals NH Department of Revenue Administration Collected $2.3 Billion in Taxes Last Year, Improved Internal Efficiency and Customer Service; and, New State of the Art Revenue Information Management System Coming. Through proactive outreach to media and utilizing Montagne’s existing relationships with the local market, the perspective of NHDRA shifted toward being a resource and reporters reached out more frequently for comment.  In 2018, we secured 127 total articles. The total impressions (number of print subscriptions and broadcast viewership where articles appeared) was more than 250,000. The total unique visitors (number of new monthly visitors to websites where online articles appeared) was more than 68 million. The total ad value (value of article space or airtime for online, print and broadcast clips) was more than $632,000.  Continuing to build on this momentum, we engaged Montagne in another year-long contract and created another public outreach calendar, continuing to focus much of our efforts on Meals & Rentals taxpayers.  One initiative was rebranding our summer compliance checks. Each summer, our collections officers go out into the field to fairs and festivals to check that mobile vendors are licensed and collecting the tax they are responsible for. This is a demographic of M&R taxpayers who are difficult to locate otherwise and struggle with compliance.  When our collections officers show up to a vendor’s booth, this can be a negative experience for the vendor, as they may be interacting with customers.  Ahead of the summer, we issued an announcement highlighting the efforts of our collections officers as a proactive resource to taxpayers, rather than an authoritative figure out to “catch them,” which served the goal of moving vendors toward voluntary compliance.  Another recommendation we received during the communications audit was to “leverage” our stakeholders, those who have an existing relationship and can influence taxpayers. We initiated a campaign with select chambers of commerce and offered in-person presentations intended for small business owners on NH taxes as an educational resource.  We gave about five presentations throughout the state and attendees were able to gather information that assisted them in understanding their tax obligations. The information provided and questions answered weren’t any different than what we would do if someone walked in or called on any other day, but the public didn’t necessarily know this resource was available. More generally, the promotion and press around these events allowed us to highlight the more positive work we do helping small businesses comply.  In 2019 we distributed nine press releases, which resulted in 100 total articles published with more than 302,000 total impressions, more than 60 million total unique visitors, and an ad value of more than $574,000. The lessons we’ve learned through these efforts have helped guide how we approach opportunities to engage the public. In the tax field, it isn’t uncommon to feel like your message falls on deaf ears. However, strategic positioning and messaging can make a world of difference. |
| Is this an in-house project, or did you partner with an outside vendor or service-provider? | We built on an existing relationship with a third-party vendor. (This would include development of a new idea or approach that works within a proprietary system that you use for many purposes.) |
| Additional information or comments about your usage of outside vendors or service providers. | Unique to New Hampshire, most vendor contracts (including the DRA’s contract with Montagne) require approval by the “Executive Council,” an elected five-member executive branch board that generally oversees administration of the affairs of the State. As a result, the DRA has had to consistently support and defend the value of using state resources for a public relations vendor. However, over the course of several contract terms, the DRA has been able to obtain continued approval of their contract with Montagne by focusing on the tremendous results we have achieved in constituent outreach through the use of a strategic approach to public outreach. |
| What comes next — will you be adding to your program, rolling it out more widely, trying additional approaches? | We renewed our contract with Montagne for 2020 and have continued the strategic communications program, evaluating our tactics and adjusting as needed on an initiative-by-initiative basis, with a formal review every year. We are in the process of introducing our new Revenue Information Management System (RIMS) to the public and working through a RIMS-specific communications plan that we launched last year. |
| Website/Documentation URL (Must be publicly accessible) | <https://www.revenue.nh.gov/publications/press/index.htm> |