City of St. Albert Business Leaders Forum

What We Heard Report







Foreword

The ‘What We Heard’ report has been compiled by X5 Management which was hired by the City of St. Albert to provide facilitation services for the May 2024 Business Leaders Forum. This independent report summarizes the discussions and key themes, and it will be published on the City of St. Albert Business Forum website page (stalbert.ca/forum).

Introduction

The third installment of the Business Leaders Forum was hosted by the City of St. Albert, and it took place at the St. Albert Inn and Suites on May 30, 2024.

This interactive event brought together more than 30 local business leaders to give their recommendations to municipal leaders on the topic of ‘How the City of St. Albert Delivers Business Communications.’ Following an initial presentation by subject matter expert Wade Bendfeld (Marketing Supervisor for the City of St Albert), participants were encouraged to provide their feedback to four questions following an interactive “world café” format.



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After each question was asked, a breakout discussion would take place. Following the small group discussions, the facilitator (Gordon Sheppard from X5 Management) led a full group discussion so that participants' answers to each question could be shared. A notetaker (Anoushka Fernandes from X5 Management) recorded the highlights, along with gathering responses from additional written submissions by individual participants.



The following sections give a brief introduction for the topic along with a summary of the business leader's responses to each question.

How the City of St. Albert Delivers Business Communications

Wade Bendfeld, Marketing Supervisor for the City of St. Albert was the subject matter expert for this topic. He made a brief presentation about the ways in which St. Albert currently facilitates two-way communications with its citizenry and business community and why these channels are important.

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After Wade spoke, then facilitator Gordon Sheppard implemented the world café format by asking the first question, encouraging participants to break out into small groups to talk about it, and then he brought everyone together to share their insights in a group discussion.

Here are the four questions, along with ‘what we heard’ from participants.

Question 1

What City information is important and relevant for the business community?

Timely and Transparent

Participants talked about the need to receive communication messages from the City of St. Albert that are timely and transparent.

For example, it would be beneficial to have access to information items going to Council for third reading as early as possible.

Another timely example is that business leaders want rapid, accurate information about construction projects and their impacts on businesses and the public.

Some participants also noted that they believe that the City of St. Albert relies too heavily on construction companies to inform the public about disruptions, and that they felt the onus should be on the City to be responsible for this type of information distribution.

They also suggested that colour coding could be implemented for specific items, as in, red for construction disruptions, blue for community events, green for opportunities etc.





It was also noted that there may be a lack of transparency about who has access to which types of information. For example, what information is for the public, and what information is not?

In addition, participants noted that they would like more transparency around how the City makes decisions about projects.

Help New Businesses

One key discussion point was that in order to help new businesses to succeed (because it's possible that as many as 71 per cent of new businesses fail), that the City could provide as much clear information as possible.

For example, letting new business owners know about the wide variety of support organizations such as NABI, the Business Link, Alberta Women Entrepreneurs, Alberta Machine Intelligence Institute, Alberta Innovates etc.

New business owners also need clear guidance about how to comply with regulations, along with summarized policy information that impacts local businesses.

Streamline The Information

Participants talked about wanting the City to make it easier for businesses by streamlining the processes for receiving information about a variety of items including permit applications, signing of permits, building inspections, development permits, etc.

Keep It Updated

It was noted that there is a high level of appreciation for the information that the City puts out, but that it would also be helpful to have the most updated information possible. This includes updating citywide demographic reports and key contact information.

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Segmentation

Everyone acknowledged that there is a lot of information to sort through to find what is relevant to their business. For example, the information needs for construction businesses and retail shop owners are very different.

This led the group to talk about the possibility of the City putting out targeted information that would expedite search time. For example, if a construction company owner could go to the 'construction' tab on the city website and find the information they need, then that would be ideal.

Show Us the Business Opportunities

It was noted that leaders would like to be as aware as possible of new business opportunities.

For example, what is the next land development opportunity, and where can I get information about it?

Another example is that businesses would like help with labour market information, as in – Where can I source talent? Is there a job posting board? etc.

Coordinate Your Efforts

Participants acknowledged that there are multiple communication channels in the municipality and that they would appreciate some coordination around who delivers which information to avoid duplication.

For example, what should the City put out vs. The Chamber of Commerce vs. the Gazette? And could representatives from these entities share ideas about how to coordinate more effectively?





Could there also be opportunities for the City to coordinate with neighbourhood Facebook groups and other prominent online information sites?

Emergency Communications

Business leaders wanted to understand the process for emergency communications, and to get help to ensure that they can identify that this type of information is coming from a credible source.

Short Attention Spans and Repetition

Everyone acknowledged our short attention spans, which led to the suggestion that the City should repeatedly push out information to multiple channels, as many times a necessary to get the messaging across.

Question 2

What channels should the City use to communicate with the business community? And why?

City of St. Albert Website

Participants want the City website to be a one-stop-shop for all information, along with wanting that information to be segmented and easy to find (in the same way that it is easy to find the garbage and recycle pages currently).





They would also like the information to be slightly more detailed. For example, if it says ‘Bridge is closing May to September’ they would also appreciate a few more details like listing what the alternate routes are as well as information about the specific impacts of this closure on businesses.

Another suggestion that was made is that the City website could have a “What businesses need to know” page.

Social Media

It was requested that the City doesn’t overwhelm people with too much data in social media, and they hoped it be possible to create well-crafted headlines that encourage people to pay attention to City information so they will actually click and learn.

Taproot Edmonton was one best practice examples that participants talked about regarding to how to put out good headlines, along with giving the right amount of information about specific subjects so that readers will actually take it in.

Participants also suggested that the City create a social media group that would help connect the City with businesses.

Newsletters

It was requested that if the City puts out newsletters that they not overload them with too much information, because people might already be dealing with too much information.

Print Is Important

Participants acknowledged that there are still many people that get information through the newspaper and other print mediums. They also noted that current print mediums should be supported.

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In-Person Events

Participants wanted to know as much as possible about local events, so they can find ways to support them, as well as to get networking opportunities to grow their businesses.

They also appreciate City initiatives like “Coffee with Cathy” (Mayor of St. Albert), and they suggested that perhaps other City employees or Councillors could create similar in-person communication opportunities.

Participants also appreciated the speaker series and Chamber events and want to see them continue.

Multi-Channel Approach

Given that different people receive information from different sources, participants suggested that having a multi-channel approach is important for the City.

For example, one family might learn about swimming lesson updates on the City website, while someone else gets the same information on Instagram.

It’s also worth noting that the business leaders did mention the importance of traditional communication channels including TV, radio, billboards, street signs, direct mail and more.

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Question 3

How should the City characterize St. Albert when communicating with audiences and potential investors outside St. Albert?

We're Open for Business

Forum participants are hungry to help the City put out messaging that attracts investment and they came up with a variety of impactful suggestions.

For example, the City should let investors know that St. Albert has a capable, educated talent pool.

Participants also want the world to know that it has the right infrastructure to attract a variety of high-impact business types, along with having the right transportation infrastructure to get people to work.

Another example is that that St. Albert has land available for the right type of development.

It also has a vibrant Chamber of Commerce with 700+ members.

Great Place to Live

Participants noted that St. Albert is a great place to live, which is a message that should attract CEOs who want to set up businesses.

For example, it is safe, clean and if you live and work in St. Albert, you'll be home in 10 minutes.

They said that St. Albert is a place to call home, with small town charm, and vibrant parks, recreation, and community opportunities.





They also noted that it's also a great place to raise a family and that housing is affordable.

Change The Perception

Forum participants encouraged the City representatives to send out messaging to change the perceptions and stereotypes about St. Albert that are outdated.

They said it's not just a bedroom community, but that it already has significant businesses and is ready to take on more.

For example, St. Albert has the largest Farmer's Market in Canada with a peak attendance of 20,000+, which is a great piece of information that can help to tell St. Albert's story to the world.

Participants also suggested that the City could track success stories and then communicate them broadly.

Make A Plan

Participants wanted the City to come up with a plan that answers the question 'Who do we want to do be when we grow up in 10-20 years?'

Then, when this vision is clear, it can be messaged broadly to attract investors.

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Question 4

How can the City improve communications with the business community?

Survey

Forum participants suggested that the City survey business leaders about how to improve communications with the City.

They suggested that this approach would help to bring out opportunities and strengths and give businesses the chance to really dig into how they want to receive communications from the City.

Frequency

Forum participants suggest that for regular and/or periodic communications that the City could set up a specific recurring date/time (instead of at random times).

For example, if the City wanted businesses to get the ‘construction update’ that it be sent out on Monday mornings at 8 a.m.

Build An Army of Ambassadors

Participants suggested that the City use everyone who is participating in the Business Leaders Forum as Ambassadors for the City, because they are committed, credible sources and cheerleaders for the City.

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Town Halls and Focus Groups

It was suggested that the City continue with regular town halls and/or focus group discussions like the Business Leaders Forum, in order to get the pulse of what's happening in the business community (and these can be in-person or virtual).

Podcast

One suggestion was that the City host a weekly podcast with episodes that are relevant to the business community. The content from that podcast could also be packaged into specific topics and short videos to be used for specific communication purposes.

Visit Businesses In-Person

Participants suggested that City representatives could go out and meet small business owners in person to gain more insights.

Success Stories

It was noted that the City could gather the communication success stories that have occurred and amplify those stories to the broader community.



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Conclusion

At the end of the evening Mike Erickson, Director of Economic Development, provided closing comments and thanked all business leaders and members of City Council for their collaborative approach throughout the evening.

He also noted that the City will be sending out a survey to get feedback about the event, as well as sending out the 'What We Heard' report.

Overall, the Business Leaders Forum was highly valuable because the business leaders were open, passionate and they brought forward many valuable ideas that will have a positive impact on how City Administration moves forward with communication initiatives in the future.

Many of the business leaders in the room had attended at least one previous Business Leaders Forum, and everyone was interested in supporting forums like this in the future.

The next Business Leaders Forum will take place in the fall of 2024. For those interested in more information or participating in future Business Leaders Forums, please visit stalbert.ca/forum.