

Government of Alberta Communications Policy

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that communications across the Government of Alberta are well coordinated, effectively managed and responsive to the information needs of Albertans.

Communicating with Albertans is a key function of the government, involving officials and employees at all levels. This policy serves as a guide for Executive Council (the Premier and Cabinet Ministers), all ministries and all government employees.

The policy is administered by the Public Affairs Bureau in conjunction with Deputy Ministers across the government. Ministries are responsible for determining appropriate protocols for reporting agencies, boards and commissions.

Approved by Cabinet on May 15, 2007

Communications Policy Statement

It is the policy of the Government of Alberta to:

- Provide the public with timely, clear and accurate information about government's priorities, policies, programs and services.
- Consider Albertans' interests and concerns when establishing priorities, developing policies, and planning and delivering programs and services.
- Ensure that the Government of Alberta is identified in a clear and consistent way – in communications ranging from signage to the telephone, mail, print and multimedia materials, advertising and the Internet.
- Employ a variety of ways and means to communicate, and provide information in the most appropriate formats to accommodate diverse needs.
- Deliver prompt, courteous and responsive communications that are sensitive to the needs and concerns of the public, and respect privacy and individual rights.
- Use public funds responsibly to obtain maximum value for taxpayer investments in all communication activities.
- Keep government employees informed about Government of Alberta priorities, policies, programs and services.
- Respect the integrity and impartiality of the Alberta Public Service in keeping with the *Alberta Code of Conduct and Ethics*.
- Ensure all ministries of the Government of Alberta work collaboratively to achieve clear and effective communications with the public.
- Coordinate communications activities with other governments, industry and other partners, where possible, in an effort to communicate more effectively and efficiently with the public.

Communications policy of the Government of Alberta

The Premier and Cabinet Ministers provide leadership in establishing the priorities and overall themes of government communications and are the principal spokespersons for the Government of Alberta. They are supported in the delivery of these communications by staff across government, including professional communications staff in the Premier's Communications Office, the Public Affairs Bureau and government ministries. The Premier's Communications Office and the Public Affairs Bureau work together to coordinate communications activities across ministries, ensuring Albertans get quality, coordinated and cost-effective communications from government.

The government aims for effective and efficient communications with Albertans. This policy provides guidance in the following areas:

1. Informing and serving Albertans
2. Listening to Albertans
3. Communicating clearly
4. Meeting diverse audience needs
5. Clearly identifying programs of the government
6. Delivering coordinated communications
7. Communicating with government employees
8. Making information available electronically
9. Communicating through the media
 - government spokespeople
10. Advertising government policies, programs and services
11. Entering partnerships and sponsorships
12. Communicating in emergencies
13. Retaining copyright

1. Informing and serving Albertans

The Government of Alberta is committed to providing Albertans with information about priorities, policies, programs and services. To assure quality service that meets the information needs of all Albertans, government strives to ensure that:

- a. trained and knowledgeable staff provide information services to the public;
- b. service is timely, courteous, fair, efficient and offered with respect for the privacy, safety, convenience, and needs of the public;
- c. a variety of new and traditional methods of communication are used to accommodate the needs of a diverse public;
- d. government programs and services are clearly listed in telephone directories, including on the government website. Toll-free phone access to government is available across Alberta, connecting citizens to government programs and services.
- e. information requests or inquiries from the public are responded to promptly, and as easily as possible, within the parameters of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*;
- f. up-to-date information about government's plans, programs and performance is available –including posting plans and reports on the Alberta government website or making copies available in libraries; and
- g. communications activities, processes and expenditures are assessed on an ongoing basis to identify areas for improvement and to make adjustments as needed.

2. Listening to Albertans

Effective communications programs address the needs and interests of Albertans. The Alberta government is committed to consultation and provides ongoing opportunities for Albertans to provide feedback and input on issues that concern them. The government encourages input on an ongoing basis through such mechanisms as the Alberta Connects phone lines and e-mail response system, the Internet and correspondence.

To promote two-way communication, government materials provide Albertans with a phone number, mailing or Internet address for more information or input.

On particular issues and topics, Albertans are invited to participate in public consultations. Each consultation provides ways for Albertans to give feedback, ranging from town hall meetings to surveys (printed or online), or individual submissions. Current and past public consultations are listed on the Government of Alberta website, making it easy for Albertans to provide input and get more information, including consultation results.

As a regular part of operations, ministries may also use a variety of ways to gather input. Mechanisms range from informal meetings to forums, information sessions, surveys, online forms and regular interactions with clients and stakeholders.

Public opinion research is conducted to help government better understand and identify Albertans' needs, expectations and priorities. Research may be used to assess the public's response to proposals or to possible changes or initiatives; to assess the effectiveness of policies, programs and services; to measure progress in service improvement; to evaluate the effectiveness of communication activities such as advertising; and to plan and evaluate marketing initiatives, among other applications.

3. Communicating clearly

The government is committed to making it easy for Albertans to understand and use government information including forms, correspondence and legislation. Information about policies, programs and services must be clear, relevant, accurate, easy to understand and useful.

To ensure clarity and consistency of information, ministries use plain language in communication with the public, as well as internally. To assist staff in writing materials that are easy to understand, free of jargon and appropriate for the intended audience, government offers courses in using plain language.

4. Meeting diverse audience needs

The Government of Alberta ensures equitable access to information intended for the general public in its publications, public meetings and services to people with disabilities and alternative communications needs. In meeting these diverse audience needs, ministries follow the guidelines and procedures outlined in the *Alternative Communications Policy*.

To meet the needs of people with disabilities, information is provided within a reasonable time and at a cost that does not exceed that charged to individuals without alternative communications needs. Information is provided in the most cost-effective format possible to meet the communications needs of the individual client.

Government of Alberta materials are provided in English. To meet specific program objectives, ministries are encouraged to develop materials in languages other than English. For example, to meet the needs of French language education or to promote services for immigrants. The primary intended audience, the expected cost and the overall effectiveness of the approach are considered when producing materials in other languages.

5. Clearly identifying programs of the government

Clear and consistent corporate identity is required to help the public in recognizing, accessing and assessing the facilities, programs and services provided through the Government of Alberta. To maintain a recognizable and unified corporate identity throughout the government, ministries follow the *Alberta Corporate Identity Program and Guidelines*.

The *Corporate Identity Program* includes the Alberta Signature (logo) and the emblems of Alberta such as the province's coat of arms and the flag.

6. Delivering coordinated communications

Communications is a shared responsibility that is coordinated within and across ministries. Ministries are expected to integrate communications priorities into their annual business planning processes.

Ministries support the government's corporate communication efforts by:

- a. reflecting Government of Alberta priorities, key themes and messages in communication plans and strategies;
- b. working collaboratively with other ministries to develop joint communication plans and strategies in areas of mutual interest;
- c. providing communication plans as part of proposals for new initiatives;
- d. coordinating communications efforts and announcements through the Premier's Communications Office and the Public Affairs Bureau;
- e. sharing materials and information on key programs across government to maintain awareness and support corporate government messages;
- f. using established templates and material formats; and
- g. coordinating advertising through the Public Affairs Bureau.

7. Communicating with government employees

Effective internal communication is a shared management responsibility. The deputy minister or department head champions each ministry's commitment to open and collaborative internal communications with the support of the entire management team – including communications and human resources. As part of keeping staff up to date on ministry programs and services, when new information is communicated to the public, employees are informed before or at the same time as information is shared with Albertans.

Recognizing the importance of regular interaction, managers and supervisors are expected to communicate with employees openly and frequently. Government offers training in supervisory competencies, including communications, to support managers in this role.

Communications branches work with ministry management to support internal communications and help ensure coordinated communications processes exist within the ministry. The Public Affairs Bureau provides strategic advice and leadership on internal communications matters and helps develop mechanisms and tools to enhance communications with all employees in support of the Government of Alberta business priorities, strategies and processes. Corporate Human Resources plays a key role in communicating information to employees.

To promote two-way communication, ministries encourage regular interaction between employees and supervisors/managers. To foster employee knowledge, awareness and understanding, this regular, face-to-face interaction is supported by a number of other internal communication tools including: a mix of published, multimedia and electronic materials, oral presentations, staff meetings, learning events and the Intranet.

8. Making information available electronically

Electronic communications, including the Internet and e-mail, are tools for building and sustaining effective communication within government, with Albertans and with others around the world.

Electronic technologies help to provide information and services to the public, and to facilitate interactive, two-way communication and feedback. They provide opportunities to connect with Albertans wherever they reside, and to deliver services. Ministries ensure that electronic communications, including those via the Internet, conform to government policies and standards.

To ensure alignment with other communication activities, websites, sub-sites and portals conform to the *Government of Alberta Web Site Standards*. This includes a common look and feel, standardized search functions and a page with basic contact information. Web site managers consult with communications staff on the editorial and visual content of web pages, including design and presentation, to ensure publishing standards and other communication requirements are met.

To ensure technology advances government's ability to connect with Albertans in efficient and practical ways, new communication technologies should serve to:

- a. enhance public access to information, programs and services;
- b. achieve efficiencies in the preparation, accessibility and dissemination of information, while preserving its availability to Albertans;
- c. foster interactive communications with Albertans and facilitate public consultation in the development and delivery of policies, programs and services; or
- d. improve service performance and/or integrate service delivery.

9. Communicating through the media

Media play an important role in the communications process – providing the public with information about government, and reporting on the public's views. The Government of Alberta works in a proactive manner with media to promote public awareness and understanding of government policies, programs and services. Ministries must be able, on short notice, to inform the media on issues of importance to decision-makers and the public. The Premier's Communications Office and the Public Affairs Bureau work together to coordinate government announcements.

Working through the Communications Branch, each ministry facilitates information or interview requests from the media, and manages plans and strategies for communicating with the media. A variety of communication tools are used to engage the media, including interviews, news conferences, background or technical briefings, and news releases. The Government of Alberta uses the Canadian Press style in media materials.

News releases, information bulletins and other announcement documents are distributed to mainstream media through Alberta Communications Network (ACN), the media distribution system managed by the Public Affairs Bureau. Media releases are posted to the Government of Alberta website, and maintained in the searchable news archive online.

Ministries respect the authority and responsibility of the Legislature, and will table draft legislation in the Legislative Assembly before releasing information to the media.

Government spokespeople

Ministers are the principal spokespeople of the Government of Alberta. They are supported in this role by communications staff, and by the senior management teams of government ministries. Members of the Legislative Assembly, chairing a government committee, leading work or making presentations on behalf of the government, may also serve as official spokespeople for these assigned duties.

Communications directors are also designated as official spokespeople. Where appropriate, each ministry may designate other communications staff, managers and knowledgeable staff, including technical or subject-matter experts, to speak in an official capacity on issues or subjects for which they have responsibility and expertise. To ensure coordinated and effective communications to Albertans, ministry officials consult with communications staff before conducting media relations.

Ministers, communications staff or other designated spokespeople present and explain government policies, programs and priorities to the public. As outlined in the government's Code of Conduct, partisan political matters are the exclusive domain of Ministers and their offices. Ministries focus their communication activities on issues and matters pertaining to the priorities, policies, programs and services administered by government.

Communications staff ensure the quality and consistency of information services provided to the media, while operating and responding in a 24-hour media environment. Media enquiries, whether by phone, email, letter or in person, are addressed promptly to accommodate media deadlines.

At all times, spokespersons will respect privacy rights, security needs, matters before the courts, government policy, Cabinet confidences and ministerial responsibility. When speaking as a ministry's spokesperson, individuals identify themselves by name and position, speak on the record for public attribution, and confine their remarks to matters concerning the policies, programs, services or initiatives of their ministry. On technical or complex matters, subject-matter experts may provide background information that is not for attribution – such as during a technical briefing on the provincial budget.

10. Advertising government policies, programs and services

The government advertises to inform Albertans about government policies, programs and services, or about dangers or risks to public health, safety or the environment or an individual's rights or responsibilities. Advertising may also be directed at audiences outside of the province and/or Canada to promote Alberta's interests.

In planning advertising campaigns, ministries ensure products are aligned with government priorities, and support government's key themes and messages. Government advertising is clearly identified, in keeping with the *Alberta Corporate Identity Program and Guidelines*.

To ensure the integrity and efficiency of government advertising, ministries follow the *Advertising Policy for the Alberta Government*. In keeping with this policy, advertising services are contracted through the Public Affairs Bureau and/or the designated agencies of record. The Public Affairs Bureau maintains an advertising agency registry and assigns advertising projects to registered agencies or through competitions. The Bureau also maintains agencies of record for media buying, recruitment advertising and legal tenders.

Ministries suspend their advertising during general elections of the Government of Alberta. During this period, advertising is only permitted when: it is required to issue a public notice for legal purposes; to inform the public of a danger to health, safety or the environment; or to post an employment or staffing notice. Planned international advertising and pre-paid advertising in programs for special events is also permitted. Otherwise, advertising plans and activities are held off effective the day that a general election is called, and don't resume until the day the newly elected government is sworn into office.

11. Entering partnerships and sponsorships

Ministries take communication requirements into account when planning, negotiating or implementing a partnering or collaborative arrangement. Joint activities or initiatives involving another government, a company, an organization, a group or an individual are communicated in a manner that is fair and equitable to all parties.

Employees responsible for negotiating, implementing or administering collaborative arrangements consult with their ministry's head of communications, or his or her designate, for communication advice and support. Such consultation takes place prior to establishing a collaborative arrangement, as well as when one is under way, to ensure compatibility with the interests and communication goals of the government.

Before entering a partnering and collaborative arrangement, ministries consider the following:

- a. the arrangement avoids conflicts of interest, upholds public trust and confidence in the impartiality, reputation and integrity of the Alberta government;
- b. the proposed partnering or collaborative arrangement has a strategic fit, a program or awareness benefit and offers value for money; and
- c. ensure the arrangements align with the overall goals of the government, the government's contracting guidelines, the government *Code of Conduct and Ethics* and principles of the *Government of Alberta Communications Policy*.

When informing the public or publishing information about partnering activities, ministries ensure that the contributions of all participants, including the Alberta government, are fairly acknowledged and attributed, consistent with the *Alberta Corporate Identity Program and Guidelines*. Corporate names and/or logos, without promotional tag lines, are appropriate identifiers for use in acknowledging the contributions of participants.

12. Communicating in emergencies

Effective communication is key in times of crisis or emergency. Government's priority is to communicate information that will protect the health, safety, security and property of Albertans. The goal is to ensure Albertans receive accurate, timely and relevant information to prevent, mitigate, respond to or recover from an emergency.

Although the lead communications agency may vary depending on the nature and scale of the threat, the important role communications plays in responding to an emergency or crisis remains the same. To this end, the Public Affairs Bureau has the lead responsibility for public communications within the various emergency response plans in place for the Government of Alberta. Each ministry will have an internal communications process outlined within their business continuity plan.

In addition to the communications staff working within each ministry, the Public Affairs Bureau maintains:

- a multi-ministry team for emergency response, including:
 - staff ready to be deployed to an emergency site;
 - staff assigned to the government emergency operations centre; and
 - staff to activate a public and media inquiry room
- online information resources.

Several government agencies at the national, provincial or local level may be involved in responding to an emergency or crisis. Co-operation with others, such as industry or community leaders and non-governmental organizations, may also be required and ministries, including communications staff, maintain links with other groups where possible.

13. Retaining copyright

Ministries comply with the [Copyright Act](#) and ensure that the ownership rights associated with works subject to copyright are fully respected in all applications. Employees also follow the *Code of Conduct and Ethics*.

Ministries abide by the government's standard communications contracting agreement which outlines that all communications materials including text, photographs, images and multi-media materials that are authorized, accepted and paid for by the government remain the property of the Alberta government. The Government of Alberta retains all copyright and moral rights to the work produced. These materials can only be reproduced with the permission and acknowledgment of the Government of Alberta.

Other guidelines:

- *Public service vision and values*: The Alberta Public Service supports the government in achieving its goals and in doing so is guided by a common vision and values (respect, integrity, accountability and excellence).
- *Code of Conduct and Ethics*: All employees working in government are guided by the Code of Conduct and Ethics which ensures service is conducted with impartiality and integrity.
- *Guidelines on Internet Use / Government of Alberta e-mail policy*

Links:

- [*Alberta Corporate Identity Program and Guidelines*](#)
- [*Advertising Policy for the Alberta Government \(updated version in development\)*](#)
- [*Alberta Alternative Communications Policy*](#)
- [*Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*](#)
- [*Government of Alberta Web Site Standards*](#)
- [*Plain language*](#)
- [*Copyright Act / standard communications contracting agreement*](#)