

Government of Alberta

# Communications Policy

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As approved by the Chief of Staff to the Premier and Deputy  
Minister of Executive Council on Thursday, September 13, 2018

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Government of Alberta Communications Policy  
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This policy uses definitions as found in the *Financial Administration Act*. Related policies for Advertising, Social Media Accounts, Government Identity, Digital Communication Standards, Web Governance, Alternative Communication and Election Communication are maintained by the Government of Alberta's Communications and Public Engagement Office (CPE).



# Government of Alberta

# Communications Policy

## 1. Purpose

The intent of this policy is to ensure that Government of Alberta communications are coordinated and effective and give Albertans the information they need.

Communicating with Albertans is a key function of government, involving officials and employees at all levels. This policy guides all ministries and all government employees.

The policy also applies to:

- **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**  
Research, consultation and other engagement activity that allows government to understand Albertans' interests and concerns when setting priorities, developing policies, and planning and delivering programs and services
- **INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS**  
Communications with Alberta government employees and the broader public service that respects the integrity and impartiality of the Alberta Public Service (APS) and upholds established and recognized codes of ethics

The policy is administered by the Government of Alberta's Communications and Public Engagement Office (CPE), working with Deputy Ministers across the government. Ministries are responsible for determining appropriate protocols for agencies, boards and commissions that report to them.

## 2. Communications policy general statement

The Government of Alberta is committed to making it easy for Albertans to understand and use government information in all forms and formats. Information about priorities, policies, programs and services must be:

- clearly presented
- accurate
- relevant

Communications will be in plain language, avoid jargon and use words appropriate for the intended audience and the communications medium. Materials will meet accessibility guidelines and be developed in a coordinated and cost-effective manner.

Government communications activity will conform to all relevant laws and regulations.

## 3. Division of responsibilities

### **Premier and cabinet ministers:**

- provide leadership in establishing priorities and overall themes of government communications
- are the principal spokespeople for the Government of Alberta
- are supported by staff across government, including professional communications staff in Cabinet Communications and CPE

### **Cabinet Communications:**

- leads media relations for the Government of Alberta
- works with CPE to coordinate communications activities across ministries
- creates and manages content on social media accounts for cabinet ministers
- assures quality and value of communications products and activities
- provides messaging and serves as a strategic lens on communications products

### **Communications and Public Engagement Office (CPE):**

- provides communications services to government departments, including:
  - giving strategic and tactical communications advice
  - creating communications plans
  - developing communications products
  - supporting public relations activities
  - providing each department with a communications lead to serve as a member of their Executive Team
- creates and enforces standards related to external communications
- coordinates with Cabinet Communications on external communications activities
- coordinates and approves research, advertising, social media, graphic design, public websites and web content, and consultations across government
- consists of members of the APS and is non-partisan

**Alberta Public Service Communications:**

- works closely with CPE and the Public Service Commission to coordinate internal communications activities across all departments of government
- provides strategic and tactical communications advice on internal communications matters
- creates and enforces standards related to internal communications

**Deputy Ministers or designates:**

- in coordination with Executive Council, direct their department's communications priorities and activities
- approve communications materials related to their department
- champion internal communications within their department



## 4. Communications principles

The Premier and cabinet ministers establish the priorities and overall themes of government communications and are the principal spokespeople for the Government of Alberta. They are supported by staff across government, including professional communications staff in Cabinet Communications and CPE.

CPE and the broader APS collaborate to provide to elected officials clear communications to and from the people of Alberta. Communications formats are chosen to meet Albertans' needs.

### **Coordinated by the Communications and Public Engagement Office**

CPE produces coordinated government-wide communications that:

- reflect Government of Alberta priorities, key themes and messages
- support new initiatives
- efficiently coordinate communications activities across all departments and Cabinet Communications
- share communications materials and resources across government to maximize efficiencies
- use established templates, standards and material formats
- provide a single window to access specialized communications services and products

### **Accessible to all Albertans**

The Alberta government will ensure equitable access to information intended for the general public. This includes public meetings and customer services.

Alternative forms of information delivery and other accommodations will be provided in a way that addresses the communication needs of people with disabilities and those supporting them. These formats will be supplied within a reasonable time without added costs to users.

Government of Alberta materials will be provided in English, but CPE and departments are encouraged to develop materials in additional languages where that is deemed beneficial to Albertans. CPE and departments must consider the intended audience, cost and overall effectiveness, including timeliness, when producing materials in other languages.

## Consistent application of Government Identity Program

The Government of Alberta must be identified clearly and consistently in all communications products. This helps the public recognize government facilities, information, programs and services. CPE will maintain the standards for a recognizable visual identity across government, and departments and ministries<sup>1</sup> are required to follow the Alberta Government Identity Program. The Government Identity Program includes, but is not limited to, the Alberta Signature (logo) and the emblems of Alberta such as the Province's coat of arms and the flag.

## Other principles

- Communications are timely, courteous, fair, efficient and offered with respect for the privacy, safety, convenience and needs of the public.
- Up-to-date information about government's plans, programs and performance is published on Alberta.ca.
- Alberta.ca will be accessible to a diverse audience of Albertans, on a range of modern devices, including to those who use assistive technologies to interact with web pages.
- Telephone directories and the government website list contact information for government programs and services.
- Toll-free telephone access to government is available across Alberta.
- Public information requests or inquiries get a prompt response within the parameters of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*.
- Government employees are supported by training and quality-assurance processes.
- Communications activities, processes and expenditures are assessed on an ongoing basis for continuous improvement.
- As required by the *Election Act*, communications activity is restricted during election and by-election periods.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Instructions to agencies, boards and commissions may vary based on the relationship established by each ministry. Details can be found in the Government of Alberta Visual Identity Manual.

<sup>2</sup> Guidelines and government interpretations related to election communications, including exemptions that exist for certain advertisements and publications, can be found in the Election Communication Policy.

# 5. Communications practices

## News media

News media are part of the communications process, providing the public with information about government and reporting the public's views. The Government of Alberta works in a proactive manner with media to build 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. **Cabinet Communications, with assistance from CPE, coordinates government announcements.**

CPE staff assigned to departments support Cabinet Communications in responding to media requests (including the sourcing of information from within the department) and collaborate with Cabinet Communications on media planning and strategy.

Communication tools used to engage the media include 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 media through the Alberta Newsroom managed by CPE. News releases will be maintained in a searchable news archive on Alberta.ca.

Ministries will 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

- The Premier and ministers are the principal spokespeople of the Government of Alberta. Cabinet Communications staff speak on behalf of the Premier or their respective ministers. CPE staff can, upon approval from Cabinet Communications, address the work and responsibilities of the department to which they are assigned.
- Members of the legislative assembly who chair a government committee, lead work, or make presentations on behalf of government may be spokespeople for these assigned duties.<sup>1</sup>
- Each department may designate 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, department officials consult with their CPE branches on these decisions.
- As outlined in the government's Code of Conduct,<sup>2</sup> APS staff will not communicate in a partisan manner.

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<sup>1</sup> This reference does not apply to Standing Committees of the legislature, nor is anything in this document meant to affect the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, caucus offices, or members.

<sup>2</sup> The Public Service Commission has more information on the Code of Conduct and Ethics for APS members.

- At all times, spokespeople respect individual privacy rights, security needs, matters before the courts, government policy, cabinet confidences and ministerial responsibility. All spokespeople must 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.

## Advertising

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 the province and/or Canada to promote Alberta's interests. **All advertising must be approved in advance by CPE.**

Departments will ensure that advertising campaigns and products are aligned with government priorities and support government's key themes and messages. **Government advertising must be clearly identified and consistent with the Government Identity Program.**

Departments must follow the Advertising Policy for the Alberta Government. Under this policy, advertising services are contracted through CPE and/or the designated agencies of record. CPE maintains this Advertising Policy, and an advertising agency registry and assigns advertising projects to registered agencies or through competitions. CPE also maintains agencies of record for media buying, recruitment advertising and legal tenders.

Whenever appropriate, government advertising will include a link to Alberta.ca. Departments will not include other websites in advertising campaigns unless approved by CPE.

## 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 CPE for communications advice and support before establishing and during a collaborative arrangement to ensure compatibility with the interests and communication goals of the government.

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

- the arrangement must avoid conflicts of interest and uphold public trust and confidence in the impartiality, reputation and integrity of the Alberta government
- the proposed partnering or collaborative arrangement must have a strategic fit, a program or awareness benefit, and offer value for money
- the arrangements must align with the overall goals of the government, the government's contracting guidelines, the government Code of Conduct and Ethics and principles of this Communications Policy

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

## Government channels

In addition to providing information to Albertans through the news media and paid advertising, the government makes information available directly to the public through a suite of managed government media channels and programs. These include Alberta.ca, Government of Alberta social media accounts, audio broadcasts (eg. "Call of the Land"), print publications and the Open Government Portal.

Government media channels, including social media channels, should only be created by departments after consultation with and approval by CPE, and are subject to regular evaluation.

Departments will ensure that government media channels and programs are aligned with government priorities and support government's key themes and messages. **Government channels and programs must be clearly identified and consistent with the Government Identity Program.**

### Social media

The Government of Alberta will use social media channels to support the larger goal of communicating in a clear, well-coordinated fashion that addresses the needs of Albertans.

To satisfy the principles outlined in this policy, government social media will be:

- **Audience-focused:** While social media accounts may promote government services and information, their primary objective is to provide target audiences with the information they need. Account creation and content will reflect this focus.

- **Social:** Media strategy will reflect the two-way nature of social media. Account managers will consider whether information is appropriate to distribute via social channels and whether the government is equipped to respond to questions and feedback before posting.
- **Responsive:** Public inquiries received via social media will be taken no less seriously than those received through other channels, and will receive complete and prompt responses.
- **Non-partisan:** Government of Alberta social media accounts are non-partisan and will not share content that promotes or favours any political party. Ministers and staff may share and post non-partisan material created for Government of Alberta social media accounts.
- **Coordinated:** Government of Alberta social media will be coordinated across government, to avoid duplication and provide Albertans with clear, trusted sources of information.
- **Accessible:** Information shared on social media will be available through other channels. No critical information will be stored solely on social media.
- **Responsible:** All government use of social media must abide by the requirements and standards established by the Government of Alberta, and the Terms of Use defined by each social network being used.

Social media account governance is subject to the Social Media Account Policy maintained by CPE, and includes the following guidelines:

- Government social media accounts are official communications channels and are subject to the same considerations as any other public communications tool.
- Creation of government social media accounts is subject to a standard planning and approvals process. Existing accounts are subject to regular evaluation.
- Social media account managers are considered spokespeople for the department and must meet standardized approval and training requirements.

CPE is responsible for ensuring that government processes and standards related to information security, intellectual property and legal and other considerations are updated as needed. Social media account managers are responsible for ensuring that social media use complies with these standards.

In accordance with the *Election Act*, government social media accounts must reduce or stop engagement during election periods.

Personal use of social media is governed by oaths and policies that govern all employee conduct and the Social Media Policy maintained by the Public Service Commission. Employees of the Government of Alberta who are not designated communications spokespeople may share publicly available information about their jobs and workplaces on their personal social media accounts but must not purport to speak on behalf of government.

## Web (Alberta.ca)

The Government of Alberta's primary digital presence is its website, Alberta.ca. CPE is responsible for the design, development and governance of Alberta.ca.

Alberta.ca is the unified website for all departments and all government content, with limited exceptions. It must comply with the Digital Communications Standards and Web Governance Policy maintained by CPE. Alberta.ca must also comply with the Alberta Government Identity Program and give government a visual consistency on the web that:

- ensures confidence in the information source
- helps the public recognize and get access to Government of Alberta facilities, information, programs, services and campaigns

There may be times when separate, stand-alone websites with different visual standards may be developed; however, all such websites must be approved in advance by CPE. Existing websites are subject to regular evaluation.

Websites will be accessible to a diverse audience of Albertans, on a range of modern devices, including to those who use assistive technologies to interact with web pages. All websites will conform to the government's Alternative Communication Policy.

## Public engagement

To understand and meet the needs and interests of Albertans, the Alberta government engages the public actively through consultations and public opinion research. **Public engagements and public opinion research must be coordinated through – and approved in advance by – CPE.**

Departments will ensure that engagement activities are aligned with government priorities and support government's key themes and messages.

Other ongoing feedback mechanisms include the Alberta Connects phone lines and e-mail response system, web tools and applications, social media and correspondence. All government materials provide a phone number, mailing or web address for more information and to encourage input.

### Consultations

Public consultations invite input and feedback on particular issues and topics. Consultations are organized by departments as part of their operational requirements. CPE coordinates, advises and approves in advance all public engagement activities by departments across government. Consultations also require approval from Cabinet and the Policy Coordination Office.

Mechanisms may range from town-hall meetings, forums and information sessions, to printed or online surveys, to individual submissions, to meetings and regular interactions between ministries and affected parties.

Current public consultations and past consultation results are listed on Alberta.ca for easy information and access, and to help Albertans provide input and get more information.

### **Public opinion research**

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

CPE coordinates, advises and approves in advance all public opinion research projects by departments across government.

## **Engaging with employees**

Effective internal communication is a shared responsibility among all employees. Internal communications must be timely and two-way. All Alberta Public Service (APS) members must receive the information needed to do their jobs, understand their challenges and celebrate their achievements. It is equally important that employees have the opportunity to share their ideas, ask questions and help shape the programs, services and culture of the APS.

Senior leaders model the government's commitment to connecting with employees in a way that emphasizes openness and sharing of ideas both in person and through digital channels.

APS Communications provides strategic advice and leadership on internal communications and change management in support of the Government of Alberta's business priorities, strategies and processes. APS Communications plays a key role in communicating information to employees through tools such as the internal MyAPS website, interactive webinars, messages from Deputy Minister of Executive Council, and internal news products.

APS Communications works with Deputy Ministers and senior leaders to support internal communications and change management, and help ensure coordinated communications processes across departments.

APS Communications will ensure that core internal communications messages and products reach all public service members through two-way channels and align with Government Identity Program standards.



## Emergencies

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

The lead communications agency may vary depending on the nature and scale of the threat. However, to ensure consistent communications during an emergency or crisis, CPE has lead responsibility for public communications under the Alberta Emergency Plan.

The growth of digital technologies, including smart phones, means that the web and social media have become crucial ways to distribute information in an emergency. During an emergency, CPE will act as the main liaison with the Provincial Operations Centre to coordinate public updates via web and social media, and to coordinate with ministries.

Government's approach to emergency communications will be "web first," including:

- live streaming update briefings with ministers and/or officials
- posting video and audio files on the web as soon as possible after live briefings end
- updating and posting information on the emergency web page before news releases are issued
- using social media channels to the fullest extent possible to help share emergency information and updates from the government and/or relevant third parties
- engaging with affected residents through telephone town halls
- where possible, engaging with affected residents through email

The above should occur in concert with traditional forms of emergency communications including news releases, media availabilities, public meetings, call centre, etc.

CPE will maintain a trained communications staff at all times capable of supporting the public communications needs of the Provincial Operations Centre, the Provincial Emergency Social Services Centre, and regional Emergency Operations Centres, local emergency sites and public registration or evacuation centres.

CPE staff in each department will maintain emergency communications plans for those emergencies for which the department is designated a lead or supporting agency.

Government agencies at the national, provincial or local level may be involved in responding to an emergency or crisis and CPE will maintain appropriate links with communications corps in other orders of government to achieve desired preparedness.

## Hiring of consultants

There may be occasions when the services of communications consultants are required to provide such things as additional short-term communications resources or specialized communications skills not available within government. Communications consultants may be hired only with CPE's prior approval. They must provide tangible services, reports or products.

## Retaining copyright

Ministries must comply with the federal *Copyright Act* and ensure that ownership rights associated with works subject to copyright are fully respected in all applications.

Ministries must 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 may be reproduced only with the permission and acknowledgment of the Government of Alberta.

