

# Step-by-Step Tips for Successful City Marketing

*A Practical Toolkit for Iowa Cities of All Sizes*



## About This Guide

Cities market themselves every day — whether they realize it or not.

Every snowplow route, every park improvement, every utility bill, and every council decision tells a story about your community.

This toolkit is designed for busy cities that have a story to tell but may not have dedicated staff or resources. It is intended to help cities:

- Build trust and transparency
- Create community pride
- Attract new residents and businesses
- Show residents the value of their property tax dollars
- Reduce negativity through proactive communication

You do not need a large budget. You do not need a marketing degree. You just need a simple, repeatable plan. City marketing is not about selling. It is about explaining. It is about building trust. It is about showing value.

Use the sections that fit your city's unique needs, adapt the templates, and build from there. Even small, consistent efforts can make a meaningful difference in how residents understand and value their local government.

*Every Iowa city has a story worth telling.  
This toolkit provides a practical way to tell it.*



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## **STEP 1: Clarify Your City's Story**

Identify your city's strengths, priorities and values to ensure all communication reflects a clear and consistent message.

## **STEP 2: Strengthen Your Foundation**

What are the building blocks you need for a strong message foundation? How to create a visual identity, which platforms to use and how to set a communication plan.

## **STEP 3: Promote Your Community Strengths**

What are data points that help demonstrate your community's strengths?

## **STEP 4: Show Residents the Value of Their Investment**

Most of what cities do is hidden from view. How do you better showcase the services you provide, the community investments you make, and why it matters to your residents?

## **STEP 5: Share the Story Together**

Cities are not islands. Work with partners and residents to add to the city's story and help carry the water.

## **STEP 6: Build Trust Through In-Person Engagement**

Cities are the closest and most accessible level of government. Take advantage through in-person engagement strategies to build bonds, highlight city services and humanize local government.

## **STEP 7: Use Printed Communication Strategically**

Not all residents receive digital communications. Printed communication remains a reliable avenue. How do you reinforce your message in a cost-effective way?

## **STEP 8: Assign a Communications Lead**

Identifying a point person helps keep communications consistent. When it's everyone's responsibility, it is no one's responsibility.

## **STEP 9: Create a Simple Monthly Plan**

A simple, repeatable plan keeps communication manageable and appropriate for the time and budget you have available.

## **STEP 10: Measure and Adjust**

Periodic reviews of city marketing will make sure you're only spending time on what works.



# Step 1: Clarify Your City's Story

Before marketing anywhere, define who you are. Taking time to identify your city's strengths, priorities, and values ensures that all communication — whether printed, digital, or in person — reflects a clear and consistent message.

## Quick Exercise (30 Minutes at a Council Meeting or Staff Meeting)

► **Discuss and write down answers to:**

1. What are we most proud of as a city?
2. What do residents misunderstand about local government?
3. Why would someone choose to live here?
4. What do we consistently invest in?

► **From these answers, draft a simple statement** (*AI can help craft/polish your statement*). Some examples of focal points and messages:

**Safe & Affordable:** *Our city is a safe, affordable community that invests responsibly in infrastructure, supports local businesses, and provides high-quality services to residents.*

**Comprehensive & Livable:** *City will be the most livable and best-managed city in Iowa.*

**Community Focused:** *A welcoming and thriving community where everyone can live, work and play in a safe and healthy environment.*

**Vibrant & Sustainable:** *A vibrant, safe and sustainable city with attractive neighborhoods, a vital economy and a high degree of mobility.*

**Small Town/Heritage:** *To sustain a vital downtown that enriches the business community, embraces history and celebrates the arts.*

You may already have a city vision or mission statement that can serve as the basis for your message.

► **This becomes your foundation for:**

- Website messaging
- Welcome packets
- Economic development conversations
- Budget communication
- Media interviews



## Step 2: Strengthen Your Foundation

Before promoting your city, make sure the basics are in place. A strong foundation ensures your message is consistent, professional, and easy for residents to access.

You do not need every tool listed below. Start with what is realistic for your community.

### ■ Establish a Clear Visual Identity

Your logo, colors, and general look matter more than you think. Consistency builds credibility and pride and makes city initiatives instantly recognizable. Professional appearance builds trust.

#### Foundation Checklist:

- Official city logo (high-resolution version saved in one location)
- Consistent use of city colors
- Standard font for letters and documents
- Updated welcome sign (if possible)
- Consistent letterhead and email signatures

#### If your logo is outdated or inconsistent, consider:

- Partnering with a local designer or high school art class
- Updating it gradually (no need for expensive rebrands)

The League may also assist a limited number of cities each year with logo development. If your city is interested in being considered, please contact the League’s communications team for more information.

*Check out how Mason City updated their city’s branding.* 

### ■ Website (If You Have One — or Plan to Build One)

If your city has a website, treat it as your digital front door.

#### City Website Ideas to Include:

- Clear contact information
- Utility payment link
- Permit and license information
- Council meeting schedule
- Budget summary
- Parks and amenities
- Emergency alerts information
- Staff directory

#### Add a “New to Our City?” Page

Include:

- How to set up utilities
- School district information
- Housing resources
- Major employers
- Parks and recreation
- Community events
- Property tax overview

*This page helps attract residents and reduces staff phone calls.*

## Social Media Presence

While not required, a social media page such as Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn is often the simplest and most effective communication tool for cities. It allows you to share timely updates, highlight projects, and reinforce the value of city services.

If using social media:

- Post consistently — whether weekly or monthly.
- Assign one staff member to manage the page (Check out [Step 8](#))
- Establish basic guidelines for responding to comments
- Check out the League’s [Social Media Best Practices](#)

The Iowa League of Cities has developed tools to make social media easier for cities.

### [City Connection Toolkit](#)

The *City Connection Toolkit* provides ready-to-use ideas, content calendar and templates that help cities. These resources are designed to be customized quickly and used across platforms.

### [Social Media Plug & Post Kit](#)

The League’s *Social Media Plug & Post Kit* content provides pre-written posts and graphics that cities can copy, paste, and adjust to fit their community.

**Example:** City of Waukon shared a simple post about what their street department is doing and why.



## If You Only Have 30 Minutes a Month

If time is limited, complete these four simple steps and share them using whatever communication tool your city already uses (social media, website, utility bill insert, newspaper, or bulletin board).

### 1. Take One Photo

Snap a picture of:

- A street project
- A park
- City staff at work
- A new business
- A council meeting

*Real photos build credibility.*

### 2. Share One Update

Post or print one short message:

- “Did You Know...” fact
- Project update
- Event reminder
- Department highlight

*Keep it factual and simple.*

### 3. Highlight One Win

Celebrate something:

- Grant received
- Project completed
- Equipment purchased
- Community event success

*Residents appreciate positive news.*

### 4. Reuse League Resources

Copy and adapt one item from:

- The [City Connection Toolkit](#)
- [Plug & Post](#) content

*You do not need to reinvent the message.*

Even one consistent update per month helps residents better understand their local government.

*Small steps. Repeated over time.  
Big impact.*

## ■ Create a Simple Annual “City Snapshot”

An annual City Snapshot is a one-page summary of your city’s key accomplishments, services, and investments.

Residents do not always see the full scope of what their city provides. A clear, visual summary helps explain how tax dollars are used and what progress has been made.

The League has provided a list of ideas below to include. You can also [download our customizable template](#) to make this easy to complete and share. Add your logo, fill in your information and change to your city colors.

### Share it:

- At City Hall
- With utility bills
- At the library
- At community events
- On your website or social media

*Use plain language.  
Avoid technical budget  
terminology where possible.*

## “CITY SNAPSHOT” ONE-PAGER IDEAS

### CITY OF [CITY NAME]: [YEAR] City Snapshot

#### About Our Community

Population: \_\_\_\_\_

Incorporated: \_\_\_\_\_

Miles of streets maintained: \_\_\_\_\_

Acres of parkland: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of city employees: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Your Tax Dollars at Work

*(could be the dollar bill concept, pie chart, etc)*

General Fund Breakdown:

Public Safety: \_\_\_%

Streets & Infrastructure: \_\_\_%

Parks & Recreation: \_\_\_%

Administration: \_\_\_%

Other: \_\_\_%

#### Major Projects Completed This Year

- [Project Name + short description]
- [Project Name + short description]
- [Project Name + short description]

#### Public Safety Highlights

Police calls for service: \_\_\_\_\_

Fire/EMS responses: \_\_\_\_\_

Emergency response time average: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Infrastructure & Utilities

Water main breaks repaired: \_\_\_\_\_

Streets resurfaced: \_\_\_\_\_ miles

Grants secured: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

#### Looking Ahead

- [Upcoming project #1]
- [Upcoming project #2]
- [Upcoming initiative #3]

#### Stay Connected

Website: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Council Meetings: \_\_\_\_\_

Social Media: \_\_\_\_\_

The City of [City Name] remains committed to responsible financial management, transparent communication, and long-term community investment. *(Include your simple statement from step one here.)*



## Step 3: Promote Your Community Strengths

Cities often undersell themselves. The key is identifying your strengths and communicating them clearly and consistently.

**Choose 2-3 strengths your city wants to be known for and highlight them consistently.**

Avoid general phrases like “great place to live.” Instead, focus on specific facts and qualities that make your community stand out.

### Consider highlighting:

- Affordable housing or average home prices
- Short commute times to nearby employment centers
- Low crime or strong public safety response
- Park acreage and recreational amenities
- Community events and local traditions
- School partnerships and achievements
- Broadband access
- Recent infrastructure investments
- Active volunteerism or civic engagement

***These strengths should be reflected in your website, welcome materials, and conversations with residents.***

For greater impact, combine these strengths with the partnerships and resident voices outlined in [Step 5](#).



## Step 4: Show Residents the Value of Their Community Investment

Most residents only notice city government when something goes wrong. Snow removal delays, road closures, utility issues, or budget discussions often draw attention — but the steady, daily work of city government can go unnoticed.

Proactive communication changes that.

### ► Instead of only responding to problems, intentionally explain:

- What services the city provides
- Why those services matter
- How they are funded
- What progress is being made

When residents understand what their tax dollars support, trust increases and frustration decreases.

### ► Focus on Three Core Messages

Rather than creating new programs, reinforce these themes regularly:

#### 1. Services Provided

What does the city maintain, operate, inspect, repair, or manage?

#### 2. Investments Made

What projects were completed? What improvements are underway?

#### 3. Why It Matters

How does this work improve safety, property values, reliability, or quality of life?

### ► Use What You Already Have

The “Did You Know,” Department Spotlight, and Before & After ideas included in the [City Connection Toolkit](#) — as well as the League’s [Social Media Plug & Post Kit](#) — can help you consistently reinforce these messages.

*The goal is not more communication.*

*The goal is a clearer explanation.*

### Simple Ways to Explain Where the Money Goes

Financial information can feel abstract. Visual tools make it easier for residents to understand how tax dollars are used.

Consider:

#### 1. “City Services Receipt”

Show where property taxes go and what they’re used for to help citizens see their money at work. [Check out this example from Davenport.](#)

#### 2. A Dollar Breakdown Graphic

Illustrate how each \$1.00 is divided using simple percentages. [Click here for example.](#)

#### 3. Project Funding Signs

When completing projects, note how they were funded by posing a simple sign (grant, Local Option Sales & Service Tax, utility funds, etc.). Clear visuals reduce confusion and increase transparency. Examples below.





## Step 5: Share the Story Together

Your city’s story is stronger when it is told by many voices. You do not have to carry the responsibility of communication alone. Partnering with local organizations — and inviting residents to share their experiences — helps create authentic, community-driven messaging.

### ► Work together with:

- Chamber of Commerce
- School district
- Economic development groups
- Library
- Local businesses

*Coordinate messaging when possible. Share each other’s updates.  
Promote community events together.*

### ► Invite Residents to Help Tell the Story

Some of the most powerful marketing comes directly from the people who live there.

Consider asking:

- A parent to share why they love bringing their children to a local park
- A business owner to explain why they chose your community
- A new resident to describe what surprised them
- A long-time resident to talk about how the city has grown
- A visitor at City Hall what they appreciate about the community
- A business owner to share how valuable the streets plowed is for their business

These stories can be shared as:

- Short, written testimonials
- Photos with quotes
- Brief videos submitted by residents
- Highlights in newsletters or on social media

Authentic voices build credibility and community pride. Shared messaging creates stronger connections and reinforces the value of your city.

### How to Ask for Community Stories

Keep it simple. You do not need a formal campaign.

Try one of these approaches:

- Post: “Why do you love living in [City Name]? Share a photo or short comment.”
- Ask a business owner or parent directly and request a short quote.
- Invite residents to email a photo and 2-3 sentences about their favorite part of town.
- Ask new residents what surprised them about the community.

Provide a clear prompt and a deadline.

With permission, share their story in your newsletter, on social media, or in printed materials.

Short and authentic is better than polished and perfect.



## Step 6: Build Trust Through In-Person Engagement

Local city government is the closest to home. As city leaders, you have the unique opportunity to build trust through direct, face-to-face interaction with residents. Proactive engagement strengthens understanding and reinforces confidence in your work.

Consider creating simple, accessible opportunities for residents to connect with city leadership.

### ■ City Hall Open House

Invite residents to:


- Tour city facilities
- Meet staff and department leaders
- See equipment and vehicles
- Ask questions about current or upcoming projects

*An open house helps residents better understand daily operations and the work happening behind the scenes.*

### ■ Coffee with the Mayor or Administrator

Host informal quarterly gatherings to discuss:

- Budget priorities
- Current projects
- Community concerns
- Upcoming initiatives

Check out this example from Indianola:   
“Coffee with the Mayor”!

*These conversations do not require a formal agenda. The goal is accessibility and open dialogue.*

### ■ Meet Residents Where They Are

Help residents better understand how your city works by offering simple, approachable education opportunities.

You can host a traditional “[City Name] 101” presentation explaining:

- What the city controls and what it does not
- How property taxes are used
- How decisions are made
- How residents can get involved
- City hall open house

*Meeting residents where they already gather makes government more accessible and approachable.*

You can also take this information into the community:

- Visit senior citizen meals or community gatherings
- Speak at programs at the local library
- Partner with local schools in connection with civic education programs
- Connect with the League’s [\*If I Were Mayor Essay Contest\*](#) as a teaching opportunity



# Step 7: Use Printed Communication Strategically

Not all residents use social media or visit your website. Printed communication remains a reliable way to reach the community.

Use existing touchpoints to reinforce key messages and share important updates.

## Welcome Packet for New Residents

First impressions matter. A simple welcome packet helps set expectations, provide important information, and build community pride from day one.

Consider including:

- Welcome letter from the mayor
- [Download sample letter to get started](#)  
Add your logo, fill in your information and change to your city colors
- Utility setup information
- Garbage and recycling schedule
- Parks and recreation information
- Key contact numbers
- Upcoming community events
- Volunteer or board opportunities

This packet can be printed or shared digitally, depending on your city's capacity.

## Display Information Publicly

High-traffic public spaces are excellent places to share short, easy-to-read updates. Post updates at:

- Library
- Pool/Splash Pad
- Community center
- Local grocery store
- Coffee shop bulletin boards
- City Hall

Printed updates do not need to be elaborate. A one-page notice or "City Fact Sheet" posted in visible locations can significantly increase awareness. Keep it brief and focused on one message.

## Example of Printed Communication:

Mayor Richardson of Indianola publishes a semi-regular "Mayor's Memo" as a direct line to residents, discussing city changes, key projects, local issues, and other items to keep people informed.



## Utility Bill Inserts

Utility bills reach nearly every household. Use this space to provide short, high-value information such as:

- Budget highlights
- Project updates
- Seasonal reminders
- Event announcements
- Volunteer or board openings
- "Did You Know" facts

Keep messages brief and easy to scan. Even one short update per billing cycle increases transparency.



## Step 8: Assign a Communications Lead

Clear communication works best when someone is responsible for it. Even in small cities, identifying one primary point person helps ensure updates are gathered and shared regularly. This does not need to be a formal title — just a clear responsibility. You do not need a communications department.

► **Designate one person to:**

- Gather photos or updates weekly
- Share 1-2 updates per week (or month, if that is more realistic)
- Coordinate with departments for project highlights
- Track key accomplishments throughout the year

*The goal is simple:  
make sure someone owns the  
process so communication  
does not get overlooked.*

► **This role can also help connect with others in the community to share information and coordinate messaging.**

**Example:**

The City of Stanton participates in a local communications group that includes representatives from the city, school, businesses, downtown organizations, and residents. The group meets monthly to share updates and coordinate messaging across the community.

Even an informal group like this can help share messaging and strengthen how the community tells its story.



## Step 9: Create a Simple Monthly Plan

A simple, repeatable monthly plan keeps communication manageable and prevents long gaps between updates.

► **You do not need an extensive calendar. Choose a basic structure and repeat it each month.**

Example Monthly Framework:

- Week 1: Department highlight
- Week 2: Project update
- Week 3: Community spotlight
- Week 4: Budget or “Did You Know” post

Repeat. Keep it simple.

You can use content from the League’s [City Connection Toolkit](#) and [Social Media Plug & Post Kit](#) resources to quickly fill these categories.

If your city does not use social media, apply this same framework to utility bill inserts, newsletters, local newspapers, or community bulletin boards.

*Consistency matters more than frequency.*



## Step 10: Measure and Adjust

City marketing does not need to be complicated. However, it is important to occasionally review what is working and where improvements can be made.

► **Look for simple indicators such as:**

- Website visits
- Social media engagement
- Attendance at public meetings or events
- Resident feedback
- Permit activity or business inquiries

► **You do not need complex analytics. Instead, ask:**

- Are residents more informed?
- Are questions becoming more proactive instead of reactive?
- Is trust improving?
- Has the overall tone toward city government improved?

*Use what you learn to adjust your approach. Small refinements over time can lead to stronger communication and greater community confidence.*