The information provided here is for informational and educational purposes and current as of the date of publication. The information is not a substitute for legal advice and does not necessarily reflect the opinion or policy position of the Municipal Association of South Carolina. Consult your attorney for advice concerning specific situations.

SWEET TEA

My Recipe for Public Trust

A look inside the role of a Public Information Officer, the work behind the scenes, and why communication matters.

Chris Makowski | Public Information Officer | Town of Summerville

WHO IS TALKING TO YOU FOR THE NEXT HOUR

Chris Makowski

Public Information Officer,
Town of Summerville, South Carolina









THE DAY JOB

A one-person shop covering social media, press releases, video, citizen communications, and policy review.

WHY I DO WHAT I DO

I do what I do because I believe people deserve to understand the government that serves them. Whether it's a crisis, a community celebration, or an ordinary Tuesday, my job is to make government more human, accessible, and worthy of the public's trust.



Master PIO

Certification

Good Morning Summerville

Daily video series. 2026 MASC Communications Award.

Town of Summerville Drone Program

Emerging Leader of the Year

Recognition



WHO I AM

So... what exactly is a PIO? Do I just post on Facebook?

NO!

The bridge

Between government and the community.

The translator

Part storyteller, part translator, part crisis manager.

The inbox

A very large inbox with a microphone attached.

THE ROLE

I don't just communicate what government is doing.
I help people understand why it matters.

MY WHY

People deserve to understand the government that serves them.

In a crisis

People need answers.

In everyday life

People need connection.

In both

Trust is the goal.

THE ROAD HERE

How I got here



01	02	03	04	05	06
Communications degree from Charleston Southern University (GO BUCS!)	Communications Consultant for large family businesses	Social media management for Berkeley Electric Coop	Communications Director for the Town of Kiawah Island	Public Information Officer, Town of Summerville	**Master Public Information Officer certification**

THE JOB

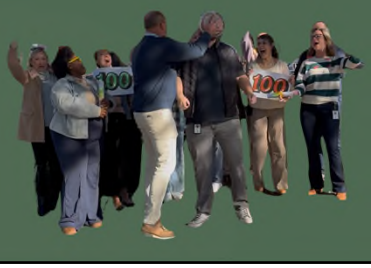
What my day can look like

- Press releases and media relations
- Town social media and digital content
- Crisis and emergency communication
- Website and public information
- Video, podcasting, storytelling
- Internal communications and employee engagement

And answering the question nobody knew who to ask!

01

GOOD MORNING, SUMMERVILLE



A daily front door to the Town.

A morning video initiative built to make local government more familiar, useful, and human. Instead of waiting for residents to find government, we show up where they already are. It also earned a Municipal Achievement Award from MASC.

02

TOWN TALK



Government has stories worth hearing.

The Town podcast gives residents a deeper look at the people, ideas, projects, and decisions shaping Summerville. It turns a government organization into a conversation with the community.

WORKING WITH THE MAYOR

I work for the Town. I work alongside the Mayor.

Prepare

Briefs, talking points and the hard question before anyone asks it.

Protect

Keep Town business and politics separate. Sometimes the answer is “not yet.”

Showcase

Let the Mayor be a person. Script the facts, never the personality.

03

SOCIAL MEDIA

Not just posts. A direct line to the community.

Social platforms give the Town an immediate way to explain what is happening, answer questions, celebrate the community, correct misinformation, and listen to what residents are saying.



THE COMMENT SECTION

How we handle social media

Post, then stick around. The conversation is the point.

1

Questions? Answer in public.

2

Complaints? Fix it, then follow up.

3

Rumors? Correct once, kindly.

4

Trolls? Follow the policy.

Don't have one?

Criticism stays up. Threats, spam and personal info come down, per our posted policy.

TOWN OF SUMMERVILLE | PUBLIC INFORMATION

04

STORYTELLING

Behind every logo is a person.

One of the most important parts of my job is putting faces and stories behind municipal services: the employees maintaining our streets, serving our parks, answering calls, protecting residents, and keeping the Town moving.



THE REACH

The audience is bigger than Town Hall

People encounter the Town every day.

- Website visits and public information
- Thousands of social media followers
- Local and regional media
- Community events and meetings
- Good Morning, Summerville and Town Talk

Every interaction is an opportunity to build trust.

THE OTHER HALF OF THE JOB

And then...

CRAP HITS THE FAN.

WHEN IT GETS REAL

The moments people remember

- Train derailment
- Boil water advisory
- Severe weather and storm response
- Major crashes and public safety incidents
- Infrastructure emergencies
- Fast-moving situations where facts change by the minute

CRISIS

When something happens, people don't wonder who the PIO is. They just want answers.

THE CRISIS ROLE

What the community needs from us

A trusted source.

1. **What happened?**
2. **What does it mean for me?**
3. **What do I need to do?**
4. **When will I hear from you again?**

Answer those four, and you are the source people come back to.

THE INFORMATION VACUUM

The first version of the story is already being written.

THE RECIPE

So how do you build trust? You make SWEET TEA.



SWEET TEA

Eight ideas that shape how I approach the job

S	**W**	**E**	**E**
SIMPLE	WORTHY OF TRUST	EMPATHY	EVERYONE
T	**T**	**E**	**A**
TIMING	TRANSPARENCY	ENGAGEMENT	AUTHENTICITY

SWEET TEA

S

SIMPLE

Government is complicated. My job is to make it understandable. (Cruising With The Mayor)

SWEET TEA

W

WORTHY OF TRUST

Trust is earned before it is needed.

TOWN OF SUMMERVILLE | PUBLIC INFORMATION

SWEET TEA

E

EMPATHY

There is a person on the other side of every message.

TOWN OF SUMMERVILLE | PUBLIC INFORMATION

SWEET TEA

E

EVERYONE

Communication only works if it reaches the community.

SWEET TEA

T

TIMING

When something happens, information cannot take the scenic route.

TOWN OF SUMMERVILLE | PUBLIC INFORMATION

SWEET TEA

T

TRANSPARANCY

People do not expect us to know everything. They expect us to tell the truth.

SWEET TEA

E

ENGAGEMENT

My job is not just to talk to the community. It is to listen.

TOWN OF SUMMERVILLE | PUBLIC INFORMATION

SWEET TEA

A

AUTHENTICITY

People connect with people, not government-speak.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

This is what SWEET TEA looks like in Summerville

- **Simple**
  Explaining complicated Town projects in plain language
- **Worthy of Trust**
  Showing up consistently, not just during crises
- **Empathy**
  Acknowledging how decisions affect real people
- **Everyone**
  Reaching residents where they already are
- **Timing**
  Getting accurate information out quickly
- **Transparency**
  Telling people what we know and what we don't
- **Engagement**
  Listening through comments, questions, meetings, and conversations
- **Authenticity**
  Making government feel human

THE PIO'S JOB

My job isn't to make government look good. My job is to help people understand their government.

THE BIGGER POINT

Public trust is not a communications department's job. It's everyone's job.

Elected officials	Department leaders	Police and Fire	Public Works and Parks	Every Town employee

Every interaction either builds trust or spends it.

THE TAKEAWAY

Communication is how government earns the right to be trusted.

THE TEST

The Sweet Tea Test

Before we hit publish, pick up the cup and ask:



Steep it before you serve it.

- **Is it clear?**
- **Is it honest?**
- **Would I want to receive it?**

If not... steep it a little longer.

ONE LAST THING

People may forget what we posted.
They may forget what we said.
But they will remember how we made them feel.

SWEET TEA

Any Questions?

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