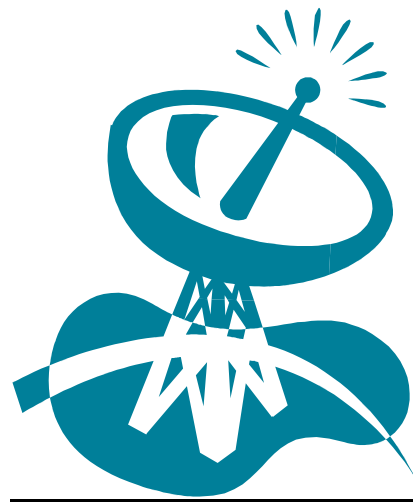




MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY



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Introduction:

From its inception in 1969 as Liverpool & District Student Housing Association, the organisation has grown considerably. Due to the ever expanding nature of the business, the Cosmopolitan Housing Group structure was formed in 2003 to accommodate the range of activities undertaken across the Group. It includes three subsidiaries, Cosmopolitan Housing Association, Cosmopolitan Student Homes, and Cosmopolitan Commercial.



Despite the range of activities that the Group is engaged in, all elements of the Group share the Cosmopolitan name and brand. This reflects the Group's commitment to a common identity and application of shared values in all that it does. This Marketing & Communications Strategy has been developed to contribute to this common objective, and ensure that the positive image and profile of the Group is maximised.

Purpose:

As a progressive organisation operating within a number of dynamic sectors, it is important that the Group is able to communicate with all its stakeholders today, and plan strategically for the future in the way that it positions itself in the marketplace, the image it wishes to portray, and the mediums that it uses.

This Strategy will help to ensure that all persons involved in the delivery of operational activity have access to timely and accurate information that help them to perform their roles, in accordance with the standards we wish to promote both internally and externally in all our communications.

This Strategy will also help to ensure that our future marketing and communications are consistent with the Group's aims and objectives. This will include ensuring that all corporate communications accord with the distinctive Cosmopolitan 'brand', which reflects the intrinsic Group wide values that guide our service delivery.

The “Cosmopolitan” Brand:

Whilst the logos and literature of the Group represent a visual manifestation of the Group brand, the corporate brand as a whole underpins everything that the Group represents, its services of today and its aspirations for the future, its capital assets and its people. We are all part of what constitutes the Group brand.

Consequently, each member of staff plays a vital role in upholding the Group brand in everything we do. All staff are communicating at all times to their colleagues, to customers, to partner agencies. Communication is not only verbal, but what is “sensed” by those around us, whether that be what we hear, see or feel. All staff need to be aware that they are continually communicating so that they may achieve maximum impact in terms of what our brand seeks to represent.

The Cosmopolitan brand stands for the following:

- Distinctive
- Professional
- Innovative and progressive
- Sensitive to our customer needs
- Flexible
- Respectful, fair and inclusive

These qualities reflect what may be summarised as the Cosmopolitan “brand”, and they should be intrinsic to the style and approach adopted by everyone within the Group. They are closely aligned with the Group’s Values.

Group Values

The values that have been adopted by the Group should be reflected in the behaviours of all staff at all times. They seek to contribute to a common purpose that is the “Cosmopolitan way”. They are as follows:

- Listening to, and communicating with, customers, employees and external stakeholders in a timely, accurate, understandable and respectful manner
- Understanding the value of effective and efficient business processes to bring about positive results
- Fostering an environment that promotes personal and corporate innovation, sharing and maximisation of resources and team-work
- Being open to change and flexible in attitude

- Respect, integrity, trust and fairness are fundamental to personal, customer and inter-agency actions
- Valuing a culture where everyone is involved, accountable, respected and appreciated
- Aim to perform at the highest level of competence and taking pride in accomplishment

Communications Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives of this Marketing & Communications Strategy may be summarised as follows:

- Ensure that all staff have access to relevant and timely information to allow them to deliver services as effectively as possible.
- Ensure that the Group is positioned to maximise its opportunities to promote the positive activities and achievements of the Group.
- Ensure the Group communicates with a range of audiences, in accordance with its commitment to inclusivity and equality and diversity, in a professional and effective manner.
- Gain recognition for the distinctive Cosmopolitan brand, so that our customers associate our services and products with quality and professionalism.
- Promote the profile of the Group at a local, regional and national level in a way that ensures that key influencers are kept informed about the positive achievements and capabilities of the Group in order to maximise its future opportunities.

Cosmopolitan Audiences

The Cosmopolitan Group and its subsidiaries communicate daily with a broad range of stakeholders. These audiences include the following:

- Customers, including tenants and potential tenants, and all individuals and groups that purchase the broad range of services delivered across the Group.
- Partner organisations and groups
- Funders and suppliers

- Local authorities
- Further / Higher Educational establishments
- All internal staff
- Board Members
- Media
- Policy and decision-makers
- General public

In short, our audiences comprise any individuals or groups that we have contact with, through both formal and informal channels and in an active or a passive way.

Internal Communications

These communications relate to interactions between staff and other representatives of the Group, including Board Members. These act as the “ambassadors” of the Group, and therefore require a thorough understanding of the values which should guide their behaviour and the objectives which we seek to deliver, as detailed within our Business Plans.

As its ambassadors, the Group needs to ensure that staff are made aware of the values and brand it wishes to portray. This Strategy forms a sound grounding for this. Only through acting in accordance with these principles can the objectives and values become a reality.

Information Provision

The Group has a range of resources to ensure that staff are kept informed about both information of generic application, and information specific to particular areas of work activity.

The formal Resources available to staff include the following:

- Intranet – A key resource that provides access to a wealth of information about the organisation, its policies and procedures and other useful items. The interactive nature of the system also allows for regular updating and news items, and as the primary vehicle for information dissemination, staff should access the intranet on a daily basis wherever possible.

- Team Meetings – Although the frequency of these will differ from team to team, all departments should hold regular team meetings to allow for a timely delivery of information and dialogue to be maintained.
- 1-to-1 – Regular meetings with line managers are also a useful source of information and should take place on a regular basis in accordance with the Group approach to performance management.
- E-mail – Allows for instantaneous communication and the sharing of electronic documentation in an efficient and effective way.
- Policies, staff guides and other leaflets - are produced on a regular basis, as and when required.
- Training – is available to all staff in accordance with individual personal development plans, and which should enable all staff to remain informed and up to date in their knowledge of both areas specific to their needs and cross-cutting issues.

Communication of relevant and timely information should be seen as a two-way process. All staff should take responsibility for their own knowledge, and disseminate information that is useful to their colleagues in a timely and appropriate manner. Through maintaining a two-way dialogue, all staff are able to contribute to and shape the direction and services the Group delivers. This means that all staff should be encouraged to contribute their own views and opinions in a sensitive and constructive way.

To support the delivery of excellent customer focussed services, each of the Group's Subsidiaries may seek to further develop their own Communication Standards.

External (potential) Customer Communications:

The Group recognises that it already communicates well with its customers. Feedback from the latest Housing Association Tenants' Survey undertaken in 2006 demonstrated that customer satisfaction with how well informed the Association kept its tenants was 89%, an increase from 80% in the 2004 Survey. A key development that has contributed to this is the establishment of a specialist Resident Involvement Team who take on the responsibility for maintaining a dialogue with the Association's tenants. Equally, a key role of the Property Managers within Student Homes is ensuring that Students are kept informed and up to date.

There needs to be a commitment to excellence in all services that the Group delivers. As ambassadors for the Group, all staff should act in accordance with its values and objectives. Only by doing so will our standards be upheld. Whilst a range of information and handbooks can be distributed, none of these will counteract the perception of a customer who believes they have received poor service from staff who fail to uphold the standards that the Group aim to deliver.

The Group aims to be a service provider of choice. For the Group objectives to be achieved, it needs to be supported by a commitment to excellence at all times. This means not only meeting our standards to existing customers, but to potential future customers. Customers that receive service excellence are also likely to become ambassadors of the Group, and perpetuate the brand we seek to promote.

It is also important that the Group does not adopt a narrow view of what constitutes its customer base. It does not only relate to individual consumers, but to the plethora of organisations and groups that the Group including each of its Subsidiaries interact with.

External key influencers

In order to effectively market the “Cosmopolitan” brand, it is important that the Group identifies the key influencers who need to receive the core messages about the activities, achievements and capabilities of the Group.

The principle influencers that need to receive information about the activities of the Group are outlined in the ‘Cosmopolitan Audiences’ section above. The Group will develop and maintain a register of contacts that the Group will establish links with (if not in existence already) and seek to maintain a regular contact with.

On a general cyclical basis, this will be achieved through the production of regular newsletters that will be distributed to such key influencers. Although not exhaustive, this will include such persons as:

- Key contacts within Local Authorities
- Local Councillors
- MPs
- Competitor organisations such as RSLs
- Local and regional groups such as North West Development Agency; Government Office; Renew.
- Universities / Further Education establishments (both existing and potential partners)

The publications will be tailored to the audience (for example, Student Homes related issues to Universities). In addition to regular (e.g. quarterly) newsletters, there will also be occasions when specific newsworthy items would also be distributed to such key influencers.

This approach will enable the Group to communicate specific items of information, but also enables the Group to raise its overall profile, and reinforce the Cosmopolitan brand through the core positive messages which the communications convey. This process has a self-perpetuating effect.

Media

Housing issues have received a higher profile in the local and national media over recent years. With potential increased exposure, it is important that such communications are managed appropriately.

Increased exposure raises the profile of the Group, and awareness of its activities. This opens up new opportunities and new markets. Local and national media are powerful influencers of customer opinion. The Group strategy is to position itself as a 'major player' within its areas of operations, and promote itself as well respected with a reputation for quality and innovation.

The Group will seek to control media exposure wherever possible, as this allows the Group to control the message it seeks to communicate with its customers and potential customers.

The approach is two-pronged. Firstly, the Group will seek to proactively identify newsworthy items which it will seek to target in particular mediums and locations. In particular, use of the trade press will be sought, which will communicate key messages and successes to a particular audience, often with a national audience. Use of the local press will also be made where particular current and newsworthy items may be identified.

A key strength of the Group in marketing terms is its social and charitable approaches. This gives the Group a leading edge over the private sector. Particular areas in which the operations of the Group are likely to generate newsworthy items are in relation to such issues as:

- Specialist role of the Group in the student and young professionals market
- Holistic approaches to property solutions and quality services
- Contribution to the provision of affordable housing
- Contribution to community cohesion issues
- Distinctive achievements of individual staff members
- Innovative ventures, such as participation in pilot projects

The second strategic element of our approach is a reactive one. Unfortunately, this will often result as a consequence of negative publicity. Management of media relations requires a high degree of skill and training. The basic principle that will be applied when staff members are approached by press representatives is to give "no comment" and to advise that all public relations are channelled through the Group Chief Executive. This principle applies unless the Group Chief Executive has specifically delegated responsibility for this matter, which would only be assessed on a case by case basis as appropriate. There will also be a preference to provide

‘written’ quotes wherever possible to maximise the Group’s control over the messages it distributes.

Where a negative situation is particularly grave, consideration should be given by the Group Chief Executive to obtaining external specialist advice and support from an agency that is experienced in managing such situations. Any retained communications support arrangements would usually be the first point of reference due to their enhanced prior knowledge of the Group.

Partner Organisations

In accordance with the Group’s broad interpretation of what constitutes a customer, partner organisations are valued customers with whom the Group has an on-going and close working relationship. All dealings with our Partners need to maintain and observe the minimum standards agreed. Effective communication of key messages to our Partners will ensure that they are able to communicate with our customers in a way that we would wish them to do so, and ensure the key messages we seek to convey are communicated on our behalf.

The arrangements for on-going communications should be agreed prior to entering into any partnership arrangements, and periodically reviewed during the duration of the partnership arrangements.

Core Messages and Profile Building

Research suggests that the average individual would receive 11,000 advertising and promotional messages per day. It is therefore important that we are clear about what we wish to communicate at all times, to maximise our opportunities.

Whilst the key messages that the Group will wish to convey are related to the objectives of each element of the Group, and delivered in a way that accord with the Values of the Group, each interaction in which we engage is an opportunity to convey key messages. This may relate to a particular area of work or be more generic.

Importantly, staff should remember that communication is not merely what is said, but relates to what is not said, tone of voice, diction use, employment of active listening skills, overall appearance, and behaviour.

Where more formal communications take place, such as in the form of newsletters or press releases, attention should be given to the style and content of the communications. It is important that staff convey the core characteristics that the Group as detailed in ‘The “Cosmopolitan” Brand’ above.

It is not possible to be overly prescriptive, as each communication will be different. However, consideration should be given to the following:

- All communications should include the appropriate corporate logo so that it becomes instantly recognisable and synonymous with the Group brand.
- The language used and the font size should be large to reflect how the organisation wishes to be accessible.
- Wherever possible, communications should include pictures of people to reflect the priority that is given to our service users.
- The persons depicted should reflect a diverse range of people, to reflect the Group's commitments to diversity.
- Where photographs of staff are included, they should be dressed and be presenting themselves in the same way and to the same standards that we would expect should they be representing the Group in person.
- Particular attention should be given to identifying newsworthy items that reflect the innovative approach that the Group promotes.

Communication Mediums

There are a plethora of ways in which the Group can communicate its core messages. Some of these will include the following:

Face to face

Whenever staff have contact with customers or any external partner or stakeholder, they are doing so as a representative of the Group. At all times therefore they need to do so in a manner that reflects the principles and objectives set out in this Strategy.

Additionally, even when staff are not in work, they should be encouraged to communicate positive messages about the Group. 'Word-of-mouth' communications can have a very powerful effect, both positively and negatively, but this is especially the case where the communicator is perceived to have an intimate "inside" level of knowledge about the Group.

Telephone

The telephone is a quick and easy way of communicating. However, staff using the telephone should remember that they are still representing the Group in the same way as if they were speaking face to face. However, the visual aspects of communication are not available over the telephone, so extra care should be taken to ensure that both parties' clearly communicate and understand the other.

E-mail

E-mail is still a formal written form of communication, and it should be treated as such. It is very easy to send or forward e-mail messages instantaneously. However, care should be taken to ensure that it is the correct person that should be receiving the e-mail, and that the appropriate “netiquette” is being followed (i.e. use of all capital letters is usually meant to denote shouting and could be offensive to the recipient).

Newsletters

A wide range of newsletters are already produced by various departments within the Group. In addition to this, the need for a corporate publication to be produced on a regular basis has also been identified, which will need to be targeted at key influencers.

Website

The internet is becoming an ever increasing part of daily life. Whenever a person wishes to find out information about the Group, the website will often be accessed.

Each organisation within the Group will therefore be required to maintain a website, each of which should maintain the agreed corporate style in order to reflect the Group’s common identity and shared values. All websites will also be required to include links to each other, so that the reader may easily navigate to the section that they require.

The Group website will be primarily used to convey corporate information about the Group, as well as containing information about job vacancies. It is therefore anticipated that the core audience accessing this site will be existing or potential partners/stakeholders as well as potential job candidates. The website will therefore also need to contain information on particularly newsworthy items of interest and positive achievements of the Group.

The Association and Student Homes websites will need to be much more operational in their nature. They will therefore need to cater for existing or potential service users, seeking to find out information about the respective company. These website will also need to be much more interactive, allowing such facilities as the ability to report repairs, make rent payments or lodge complaints.

Media / Press Releases

Whenever formal press releases are released, it will also be important for the release to be accompanied by a standard description of the organisation, often included within an ‘Editor’s Notes’ section.

Accessing the media requires knowledge of which is the most suitable location for a particular communication to be placed in, as well as assessing which articles would be “newsworthy”.

It is anticipated that this role will be undertaken by an external specialist, contact with whom will be managed through the Chief Executive’s department unless delegated to particular individuals as required.

However, the role of an external specialist is dependent upon the supply of information from internal sources, and all staff should therefore take responsibility for identifying potentially “newsworthy” stories. These should be reported through the standard line management structures.

The media which can be exploited by the Group is considerable and varied. For some items it may be necessary to purchase space within a publication (e.g. advertisement within a diversity publication which markets the Group’s brand as an organisation that embraces diversity). A budget should be set aside each year to meet such anticipated costs. However, many newsworthy items will not require any payment due to their inherent “newsworthiness”.

Guidance will be sought from external communication specialists on what is the most appropriate media to target for particular stories. However, this will include such places as:

- National and Local Television
- National, regional, local and specialist trade press
- Electronic publications (these are becoming increasingly popular and are particularly useful to highlight lower level news items as a strategy for regularly promoting the Group (or relevant Subsidiary) image)

Retained Communication Consultants

The Group will seek to procure the services of a retained communications specialist to assist the organisation to manage its external communications.

The purpose of this facility will be to assist the Group with the following:

- Develop an overall communications strategy for how they will use their specialist knowledge to manage and promote the profile and image of the Group on a long term basis
- Establish a relationship with the Group so that they can understand the Group, and the values that it represents, so that news items may adopt an appropriate style and format

- Assist the Group to produce formal communication items in an appropriate style
- Use their contacts and knowledge of the market to target the most appropriate media to use for particular communication items
- Assist the Group to effectively manage and mitigate the effects of any negative publicity

Equality and Diversity:

When implementing this strategy, consideration needs to be given for every publication as to how the communication needs to be accessible for a full range of diverse groups, as identified within the Group's Equality and Diversity Strategy.

This relates both to the format and presentation of a publication, in addition to whether particular specialist publications need to be identified and utilised for particular items.

Outcomes:

The outcomes of this strategy will ensure the following:

- All staff will be familiar with the Values and Objectives of the Group, and will seek to uphold these in all their communications, both internal and external.
- Staff will be familiar with and trained in the full range of communication media appropriate to their role.
- Staff will have a clear understanding of the overall image and brand that must be upheld in both internal and external communications.
- The profile of the Group will be raised, in a manner that is consistent with its values and objectives, particularly in relation to key influencers.
- The Group will have positive profile that reflects the distinctive brand on a local, regional, and national level.

DOCUMENT CONTROL SUMMARY

Policy Title	Marketing & Communications Strategy
Dated Created	March 2007
Person Responsible	Group Chief Executive
Version	1.1
Date last amended	5 th March 2007
Authorised by	Board of Management
Review Period	3 Years
Review Committee	Board of Management
Date of last review	N/A
Date of next review	March 2010