

VICTORIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION

ELECTORAL INTEGRITY: REPUTATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

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SECTION 1:

Introduction

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) has maintained a strong and credible reputation and is well-regarded by its stakeholders. There is a clear sense of pride within the organisation and a commitment to continually do better.

In an environment of fast-paced change, uncertainty, volatility, literacy challenges and changing consumer expectations and media consumption, we are experiencing cultural polarisation and an erosion of trust in our institutions. The ever-evolving social and political context, coupled with divisive discourse, pandemic impact, radical transparency, and the rise of misinformation and disinformation, cybersecurity risk has the potential to be reputationally harmful to the VEC.

The VEC recognises that retaining public trust is essential for ensuring all Victorian voters participate in their democracy. To do so, it needs to demonstrate that democracy is underpinned by integrity, fairness and participation.

To respond to challenges, the VEC has developed this reputation management strategy which aims to:

- build internal capability and capacity with training, simulation and ongoing reliable support
- manage reputation proactively by understanding context, audiences, stakeholders and issues and responding with contextually appropriate strategic communications approaches messaging and templates
- ensure sustainability by maintaining a risk management culture, monitoring, evaluating and applying learnings on an ongoing basis.

The strategy addresses brand positioning and reputation, as these are tightly aligned and impact each other, while ensuring preparedness in meeting challenges.

This strategy is part of a comprehensive framework comprising the following supporting tactical plans:

- Digital Engagement Project plan SE2022
- Media Engagement Project plan SE2022
- Social Media Operational Guidelines
- Electoral Misinformation Management Plan
- COVIDSafe Election Plan
- Internal Communication Project Plan SE2022
- VEC Stakeholder Management Framework
- Issues and Crisis Management Plan.

Purpose

SCOPE

The Electoral Integrity and Reputation Management Strategy is a medium-term strategy extending beyond the November 2022 Victorian State Election, inclusive of local government elections in the coming two years.

This strategy incorporates priority communication channels and methods.

With the increased spread of digital and social media within our society as a way of working, living and communicating, a significant focus of this strategy is communications across social channels and platforms.

VEC VISION

All Victorians actively participating in their democracy.

STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

- Public perception of electoral integrity in elections is maintained and sustainable.
- Voters have confidence and belief in the democratic process.
- VEC is well-regarded as an impartial, transparent and independent authority upholding integrity.
- Positive election experience for all audiences.
- Reduced negative sentiment towards the VEC by target publics.
- Increased awareness / Improved recognition.
- Stronger level of advocacy and support from community groups for the democratic process and VEC education and engagement programs.

POSITIONING

Position VEC as the fair, impartial and independent umpire.

STRATEGIC APPROACH

Be prepared

- Build internal capability and capacity.
- Embed process and strategy through simulation, training, briefings and rehearsal.
- Know the issues and have responses and materials prepared.

Be proactive

- Proactively communicate the VEC's role and the role of stakeholders.
- All responses and materials will consistently position the VEC as the fair, impartial and independent umpire.

Ensure sustainability

- Maintain a risk management culture keeping issues top of mind.
- Have a future lens on emerging issues.
- Ensure documents are live and be rigorous in maintaining and updating materials and frameworks.
- Learn from election campaigns and proactively apply learnings.

Context

REPUTATION

Reputation has implications across an organisation. It is impacted by any behaviour on an organisation's behalf or is perceived to be done on behalf of an organisation.

While integrity and reputation management strategies and tactics in this document mostly focus on communication, as any behaviour or action can improve or damage reputation, every person who works at the VEC has a role to play in building, maintaining and protecting the VEC's reputation. For this reason, the strategy has been created to be embedded across the organisation to create and embed a culture of risk management.

The reputation of any organisation is highly valuable. For the VEC, its reputation and the perception of integrity of Victorian democracy are inexorably linked.

Similarly, issues arising from other state or federal elections have the potential to impact the Victorian election.

While trust in democracy in Australia is relatively high, trust in government is low¹, which can impact the VEC's reputation and ability to conduct its core business when the VEC is misunderstood or misperceived to be an arm of government.

The ever-evolving social and political context, including rising levels of electoral misinformation and disinformation², divisive discourse, increased voter volatility³ and public distrust in politicians and institutions⁴, present tangible issues.

The diversity within the Victorian community and VEC's stakeholders also means each stakeholder⁵ and audience segment has its own set of unique needs.

The VEC has to maximise its limited resources while addressing these issues.

This strategy, in conjunction with the supporting reputational management framework, seeks to protect and build on the VEC's reputation to ensure trust and confidence in Victoria's elections.

¹ [The Australian Voter Experience – The Electoral Integrity Project EIP](#) (January 2017)

² [Imported narratives and new frontiers for election misinformation: Lessons from CrossCheck Australia: Election Watch](#) (firstdraftnews.org, June 2022)

³ [Electoral democracy in Australia: crisis, resilience and renewal](#) (October 2019)

⁴ [Edelman Trust Barometer - Australia Report - Top 10 Takeaways 2022](#)

⁵ [Australian Bureau of Statistics - Cultural Diversity in Australia](#) (September 2022)

Goal and objectives

GOAL

Protect and build VEC's reputation as an impartial and independent umpire upholding electoral integrity and democracy.

The VEC will evaluate its performance against these objectives as part of its reputation management index work and the formal evaluation process for the 2022 State election.

Objective	Outcome
Help voters understand the scope and role the VEC and they play in the electoral process	<p>Voters have confidence and belief in the democratic process</p> <p>Public perception of electoral integrity in elections is maintained and sustainable</p> <p>VEC is well-regarded as an impartial, transparent and independent authority upholding integrity.</p> <p>Positive election experience for all audiences.</p> <p>Increased awareness / Improved recognition</p>
Build and embed robust internal VEC capability to proactively address strategic and operational risks, manage issues that could impact the trust and confidence in democracy and electoral integrity	<p>Staff feel confident to do their jobs well and that have the tools, skills and knowledge to proactive recognise and manage issues</p> <p>Voters have confidence and belief in the democratic process</p> <p>Public perception of electoral integrity in elections is maintained and sustainable</p> <p>Reduced negative sentiment of the VEC by the public</p>
Minimise and reduce the reputational impact of top tier issues that escalate	<p>Reduced negative sentiment towards the VEC by target publics</p> <p>Voters have confidence and belief in the democratic process</p> <p>Public perception of electoral integrity in elections is maintained and sustainable</p>
Empower Victorian voters to recognise misinformation and disinformation in the lead-up, during and after elections and understand what to do	<p>Reduced negative sentiment towards the VEC by target publics</p> <p>Voters have confidence and belief in the democratic process</p> <p>Public perception of electoral integrity in elections is maintained and sustainable</p> <p>Increased awareness/improved recognition</p>
Deepen the knowledge of key electoral stakeholders regarding the electoral process, shared responsibilities and accountabilities	<p>Positive election experience for all audiences</p> <p>Stronger level of support from community groups for VEC education and engagement programs</p>

SECTION 2:

Environmental scan

Informing the strategy are considerations that arose from the research and intelligence gathering and the workshop process.

The considerations are inclusive of issues and insights that have the potential to either positively or negatively impact the reputation of the VEC. These considerations will need to be prepared for and proactively addressed.

[Pace of and appetite for change](#)

The world in which the VEC operates and communicates is volatile, uncertain and changing faster than ever. The VEC is invested in evolving its approach to digital and social media to help to protect and build its reputation.

[Socio-political polarisation](#)

Polarisation of extremes in society and politics in many countries, including Australia, and has seen a subsequent rise in misinformation and disinformation⁶.

[Trust decay](#)

In recent years trust in institutions, including government and media, has continued to decline despite a short-term spike in trust levels in Australian governments in response to the COVID19 pandemic in 2020 and the first half of 2021⁷. This has led some people to seek out alternative sources of “truth”.

[Levels of literacy](#)

Literacy challenges exist for almost half of Victorians⁸.

[Radical transparency](#)

With the rise of connectivity via social media, all aspects of what an organisation does can become visible, and any say-do gap can have a significant negative impact upon reputation.⁹

[Misinformation and disinformation from foreign interference](#)

Foreign interference in diaspora communities and the risk of cyber hacking have contributed to the propagation of misinformation and disinformation¹⁰. Acts of foreign interference can impede the ability

⁶ [Imported narratives and new frontiers for election misinformation: Lessons from CrossCheck Australia: Election Watch](#) (firstdraftnews.org, June 2022)

⁷ [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) (February 2022)

⁸ [Australian Bureau for Statistics - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia](#) (October 2013)

⁹ [Reputation and its risks](#) (Harvard Business Review, February 2007)

¹⁰ [Disinformation, stigma and Chinese diaspora: policy guidance for Australia](#) (firstdraftnews.org, August 2021), [Defending democracies from disinformation and cyber-enabled foreign interference](#) (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, April 2021)

of Australians to make independent judgements and can erode public confidence in Australian political and government institutions.

Inadvertent cybersecurity breach

In addition to any acts of interference or hacking, inadvertent cybersecurity breaches also risk damaging the reputation of the VEC. Operational measures to mitigate the risk of this occurring are outside the scope of this reputation management strategy. However, the way in which the VEC responds to such a breach is within scope.

Accessibility and inclusion

Some people and communities may feel disadvantaged with respect to their ability to participate in the democratic process due to situational circumstances, cultural backgrounds, language and lived experiences. Accessibility and inclusion relate to the democratic process, active citizenship and communication.

COVID impact

The polarisation arising from the impact of pandemic lockdowns in Australia and anti-government sentiment could be amplified via further outbreaks of COVID-19 or influenza. Further COVID-19 outbreaks could also impact access to voting centres on election day and necessitate contingency plans to be put in place for voters unable to attend voting centres in person. Adequate notice of these arrangements will need to be provided to those affected.

Changing consumer expectations

A cross section of the community, particularly younger audiences, expect voting to have kept pace with change, through initiatives such as access to digital voting.

Collective ownership

VEC seeks to foster a sense of shared responsibility and collective ownership of democracy for all stakeholders.

Role ambiguity

VEC's full role, its status as an independent and impartial statutory authority and its demarcation from the Australian Electoral Commission are often misunderstood.

Transparency and understanding

VEC's role and remit with respect to issues such as the authorisation of political advertising and donor involvement is poorly understood. There is an opportunity and need to communicate this better.

Commitment to engagement

Proactive and strong relationships with targeted community groups and external stakeholders are needed. Peer-to-peer communication and leveraging existing community structures and networks helps close the trust gap and engender participation.

Changes to voting process for those residing overseas

Changes to the voting process for those who reside overseas need to be communicated clearly and with ample notice to enable those voters to participate freely in the democratic process.

Consumption of media

Australia has relatively light levels of news consumption. While print news consumption has risen slightly for the first time since 2016, only one in five Australians consumes print news. Broadcast, and

specifically television, is the most widely consumed source of news in Australia followed by online news and social media¹¹. However, the internet and broadcast media are not equally accessible to everyone, and there are some people and communities that predominantly receive information from other trusted sources like community groups and leaders and family members.

¹¹ Media Consumption and Diversification Shifts, [Digital News Report: Australia 2022](#) (OMD, 2022)

SECTION 3:

Guiding principles

At the core of our communications activity, we are guided by established principles of effective communications. These have been adapted specifically in a reputation management context.



KEEP IT SIMPLE

- Simpler language is more powerful and effective¹²
- Favour shorter sentences
- Incorporate visuals and video to help understanding
- Make it easy to act



ACTIVELY LISTEN

- Seek to understand first before responding
- Be sensitive to people's circumstances, backgrounds and lived experiences
- Be mindful of behaviours as well as what is said



BE OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

- Be clear about the choices and consequences
- Own your response
- If you cannot provide details, then be clear about why you are unable to do so



BE TIMELY AND RELEVANT

- Prompt audience when communications are likely to have the most impact
- Right message, right audience, right channel, right context
- Prioritise what is important for the audience



BE CONGRUENT AND CONSISTENT

- Be consistent in your branding, tone-of-voice, messaging, look and feel
- Be consistent across channels
- Ensure messages make sense and work alone and as a set



BE ADAPTIVE AND RESPONSIVE

- Know the context, respond when appropriate and respect your audience
- Assess the situation, and be prepared to adapt as needed



ENGAGE PROACTIVELY WHERE APPROPRIATE

- Assess the situation and the level of risk, the audiences and/or stakeholders involved to apply judgement on whether to engage or not
- Sometimes it is best not to engage

¹² *Consequences of Erudite Vernacular, Daniel Oppenheimer, Applied Cognitive Psychology, 2006*

Strategic communication approaches

To position, protect and build upon the VEC's reputation as an impartial and independent umpire upholding electoral integrity and democracy, there are five core strategic communication approaches.

These can be applied in a linear fashion, beginning with the foundational approach of awareness building via **inform and educate** and **assess and act**, to shifting mindset by **frame and reframe**, through to behaviour change via **engage and empower** and **recognise and reinforce**. These are also designed to be used contextually, meaning that one or more of the approaches can be implemented if that is most appropriate for the context, audience and outcome sought.

1. Inform and educate

Inform audiences and stakeholders with accurate information and educate about roles, the what and the how of voting and elections.

2. Assess and act

Assess the situation relating to issues and risk and act appropriately.

3. Frame and reframe

Frame the issue as a positive and reframe a situation from a negative to a positive to reposition and help mitigate an issue and/or inaccurate information.

4. Engage and empower

Proactively engage with influential communities and stakeholders and empower them with tools to connect with target audiences and deliver the right messages at the right time.

5. Recognise and reinforce

Recognise people for positive actions, support and messages, and reinforce the positive behaviours.

Phased activation

