Services to the media
Media relations

The media are a primary source of information during an election. To support its election advertising campaign and to further improve voter awareness and understanding the VEC provided the media with clear and accurate information about the electoral process, sought opportunities to promote its electoral services, and responded to enquiries and issues as they arose to ensure public confidence in all aspects of the electoral process.

The VEC appointed the public relations consultants Robert Masters and Associates to assist with media relations.

The VEC produced more than a dozen media releases and fact-sheets during the 2002 election, which were distributed into the newsrooms of almost all Victorian media organisations though AAP’s media-net service. These media releases are listed in Appendix 7.

To support all communication activities and to provide additional information, the VEC’s spokespeople were available to respond to media enquiries at all times. The Electoral Commissioner and the Manager of Public Information and Corporate Communications were frequently interviewed or provided comment to the media during the election. An effort was made to ensure that all media enquiries were responded to in a timely manner and that helpful responses were provided.

During the course of the election representatives from the VEC were interviewed by or provided news information to:

- ABC TV, Channel 10 and WIN TV;
- 774 ABC, 3AW, 3AK, 3MMM, FOX FM, GOLD FM, Nova, 3BO (Bendigo), 3YB Warrnambool, 3RPH (Radio Print Handicapped), and various ABC regional radio stations; and
- The Age, Herald Sun, The Australian, The Australian Financial Review and a number of regional and suburban newspapers.

Interview topics included:

- changes to electoral legislation;
- the VEC’s initiatives to encourage people to enrol;
- how and where to enrol for the State election;
- the record number of candidates contesting the election;
- arrangements for voters unable to vote on election day;
- arrangements for the tally room and the provision of election results; and
- the counting of votes after election day in a number of close districts.

There was also some media coverage of initiatives developed by the VEC for the 2002 election. These included television and press interviews to promote the VEC’s trial of special voting services for vision impaired voters, a feature in The Age on the VEC’s education kit, Your opinion counts, and improvements to election processes. Copies of the resulting newspaper features are included in Appendix 8.

Information Kit

As part of its information services for this State election, the VEC prepared an extensive election information kit. The kit was distributed to the media, political parties, MPs and election officials in early November 2002.

The information kit featured profiles of each Victorian electorate, including statistical data on key socio-economic indicators provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It also included essential information on the 2000-2001 redivision of electoral boundaries, the new Electoral Act 2002 and the swings needed for seats to change hands at this State election.
The tally room

The tally room is the focus of media attention on election night and television broadcasts were again hosted from the tally room at the 2002 election.

Finding a suitable venue for the tally room presents the VEC with a considerable challenge. A venue must be able to accommodate the tally board (which is over 20 metres long), four television studio sets, areas for radio and print media, and seating for the general public.

This challenge has been compounded by the fact that the VEC does not know in advance when the election will be held. In the lead-up to the 2002 election the VEC was required to monitor the bookings in a small number of suitable venues over the twelve-month period during which the election could be held (30 November 2002 – 3 January 2004).

The VEC’s preferred venue, the Melbourne Exhibition Centre, was available for use as the tally room for the election on 30 November 2002.

Preparing the tally room is an enormous logistical exercise. It took over a week to construct the tally board, seating for the public and media, and television studio sets. Extensive security arrangements were established during the set-up of the tally room and on election night. Entry to the tally room at all times was by pass only.

On the Thursday before election day a full rehearsal was conducted at the tally room to test computer systems and the transmission of results and to finalise the training of staff.

The tally room cost approximately $250,000 to establish and operate. This included venue hire, wages, security and all communication and technical costs. The media were responsible for their own set-up and operating costs.

Election night

The tally room was attended by major media organisations including:

• ABC, Nine, Seven, Ten and Sky television;
• ABC, 3AW and 3AK radio; and
• major Victorian and national print media.

The VEC placed an advertisement to invite the public to the tally room on election night. The response was enthusiastic and the 550 respondents who had been issued with passes filled the public gallery.

Large television monitors were provided to enable the public to follow television coverage in the tally room. Feedback received from journalists at the tally room was positive comment about the atmosphere that was created by a public presence.

Electronic transmission of election results

Election results were transmitted electronically to the tally room and broadcast media present in the tally room on election night. Data was transferred directly as it was keyed into the VEC’s election management system at the offices of election managers.

Media outlets and other interested parties were also given the opportunity to receive the latest results via email on election night. Pre-formatted result reports were emailed automatically from the VEC’s election management system at half-hourly intervals until the close of counting on election night.

Most journalists relied on the VEC’s website for results on election night. The website was updated every ten minutes. At 6.30 pm on election night there was a technical fault that meant the website was not updated for about 45 minutes. During this period updated results continued to be posted to the tally board and distributed to the media.

The future of the tally room

Following recent elections there has been speculation about the need to retain the tally room for future elections. Feedback received by the VEC following the 2002 election again suggests that the media would like the tally room to be retained as an atmospheric focal point for election night coverage. Most political parties also appear to be in favour of retaining the tally room.
Complaints about the media

During the course of the State election the VEC received two complaints about the media. In one case the VEC took action to ensure that legislative requirements for the authorisation of a letter were complied with on future occasions. The second complaint appeared to relate to the failure by a newspaper to comply with the instructions of an advertiser. The complainant was advised to take the matter up with the newspaper concerned.

The VEC's performance in providing services to the media

Following the election, Robert Masters and Associates conducted interviews with journalists from the television, radio and print media to evaluate the information services provided by the VEC during the election.

Overall, journalists rated the VEC’s communications performance very highly, and the VEC enjoys an excellent reputation among the media. The opportunity to comment on the VEC’s performance was seen as in keeping with the overall professionalism displayed by the VEC in all of its operations.

Journalists commented positively on the performance of the VEC’s spokespeople, their availability and the quality of the information provided. Respondents acknowledged that the VEC was unable to comment on certain issues, but several felt that the VEC could have been more forthcoming in relation to the Robert Dean issue.

The VEC’s media releases provided useful information about the election. However, some journalists could not recall receiving releases, which were usually faxed to newsrooms through AAP. These journalists would have preferred to have information sent to them directly.

There was a very positive response to the information kit provided to the media and the improvements that had been made were well received. The majority of respondents used the kit regularly during the election.

The VEC’s website was a more important source of information for the media at this election than in 1999. All used the website, usually daily, but some preferred the hard-copy information kit. Some journalists requested that information including the contact details of candidates and results by voting centre be available on the website. All this information was available on the website but these comments suggest that the usability of the website could be improved to make it easier to find information.

The website was the primary source of information about election results. Some concerns were expressed about the speed with which results were posted to the website. All results were posted as votes were counted, and in future the VEC will provide a timetable outlining the availability of results for electorates where counting is incomplete.

The tally room was seen as playing an important role in the election – “democracy in action” was one description. The journalists who covered the election from the tally room thought that there was a great atmosphere and welcomed the presence of the public. Some would also like to see a return to the practice of earlier elections when party leaders made an appearance.

Recommended service improvements

Prior to the next election the VEC will make further improvements to enhance the communications services provided to the media during an election. Areas that have been identified for improvement include:

- the introduction of fixed term elections will remove uncertainty over the date of the election and will allow election information, including the information kit, to be provided to the media well before the election begins;
- the distribution of information will be reviewed;
- the VEC will produce a daily bulletin for the media that will show the status of election results; and
- the VEC’s website will be redeveloped before the next election to improve accessibility and reliability.