



DIGITAL GOVERNMENT

Creating the Social Media Game Plan

BY SPENCER STERN AND PATRICK IBARRA

It's a new world — a digital world. The days of public hearings and physical petitions being submitted to demonstrate the general public's concerns are rapidly fading, being replaced by new citizen engagement tools. These social media outlets are no longer a luxury for the public sector, especially at a time when government is front and center of so many significant issues — and the size of an organization or community is irrelevant, as people are just as busy consuming information in small towns as they are in large urban areas.

There are still government leaders, both elected and appointed, who view the entire subject of social marketing as something government doesn't have to deal with. However, the idea that social media is a fad that leaders can simply wait out is risky. Social currency has always been vital to the credibility of government, and with the explosion of social media devices, governments need to accelerate their timetables for adopting and implementing contemporary strategies and tactics.

Public finances are more highly scrutinized than ever before. This gives government finance professionals a tremendous opportunity, in the spirit of transparency and accountability, to communicate via social media. Ask yourself how well your organization has aligned its communication efforts with what its constituents want to know and how they want to be informed. Some members of your community will find the budgeting process riveting, and others are watching for the newly issued bond statement.

Simply posting undifferentiated information to your agency's Facebook and Twitter accounts is becoming outdated. Governments at all levels need to move past this stage and use social media as a way to interact with the community. One way to start is by posting a question to residents and employees on your Facebook page asking what type of information would they like to see provided there. This acts as a 21st century focus group providing real-time input. This input needs to be balanced with additional research, however, because some users hide behind anonymity to make controversial comments or voice inflammatory opinions.

Social media outlets are no longer a luxury for the public sector, especially at a time when government is front and center of so many significant issues.

The increasingly widespread use of social media provides governments with a compelling opportunity for building community with its constituents, although there's much more work involved than just creating a Facebook page or a Twitter account and posting something to it occasionally. The effort pays off, though, and progressive governments nationwide are using social media outlets to enlist their citizens in a collective journey toward good government.

Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity, said, "It's easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting." Government is good at thinking, but after a certain point, doing studies and preparing and revising policies can grind things to a halt. You need to move forward.

CREATING THE GAMEPLAN

Jurisdictions are turning to social media applications for four main reasons:

1. Financial challenges are forcing organizations to reduce costs, improve service delivery efficiencies, and optimize existing resources.
2. Providing multiple channels allows constituents to choose how they will interact with their jurisdictions.
3. Making records available to constituents enhances transparency and compliance — although at the same time, organizations must ensure the security and privacy of the data collected.
4. Taking advantage of new technologies can deliver measurable results.

Pursuing a social media strategy requires an inclusive plan that spans the entire organization. Jurisdictions that take a scattered, isolated approach fail in meeting their objectives because they lack executive support, funding, compliance with acceptable use standards, and/or integration with incumbent technologies and systems. Developing social media applications is often easier than actually deploying them because the employees on the development team are typically well versed in using the technologies. The challenge is giving them the guidance and support to get them going, and ensuring that a system of checks and balances is in place before content is released via social media outlets.

More Input from Citizens

The City of Bismarck, North Dakota, began using social media in April 2010 and has rapidly experienced the benefits of improved access and interaction with citizens. While Bismarck continues to use traditional methods of communication, social media has increased citizen participation and interactive communication. Social media has helped citizens genuinely engage in active, thoughtful, and spontaneous conversations that provide them with a quick method of sharing input. City leaders receive input they might not have gotten otherwise.

Social media has been particularly valuable in helping the city supply citizens with timely, critical information that they can receive via e-mail or text on their smart phones during emergency situations, even when they have been displaced or are away from their homes. Social media messages reach them no matter where they are.

The following game plan presents a suggested approach for launching, or in some cases, re-launching your social media strategy — it is never too late for smart planning. Keep in mind that if you start with a decision about which social media applications you intend to focus on and build the team around that application, you could be neglecting other options that may make better sense for your community. The key steps include:

1. Creating and structuring the team.
2. Identifying tangible, measureable goals that are linked to the organization's overall mission and objectives.
3. Developing key policy and acceptable use guidelines.
4. Identifying potential technologies and their related benefits and impacts.
5. Developing a sustainable, repeatable, iterative process.

CREATING AND STRUCTURING THE TEAM

When building the team, you'll want to cast a wide net throughout your organization. Look across all

departments for potential participants. The social media team typically reports to the public information office, city manager's office, or the head of the information technology department. Millennial employees, also known as Generation Y (born between the mid-1970s and the late 1990s), tend to be interested in this kind of project, but you'll need to include a mix of employees across generations, departments, and tenure. Different segments bring unique strength to the table. For example, Millennials often have technological expertise and willingness to try new approaches — they are unencumbered by historical constraints. Generation X (born between the late 1960s through the late 1970s) tends to have excellent project management skills; they can be opinion leaders and provide "adult supervision." Baby Boomers (born between the mid-1940s and the mid-1960s) contribute institutional knowledge, executive support, and mentoring.

In addition, look to external resources to support the initiative. For example, the Township of Evanston, Illinois, actively recruits students and interns from nearby Northwestern University to support its social media efforts. It is usually possible to find talented people who are willing to help at little or no cost.

Pay attention to structure from the outset. Establish a clear chain of responsibility and reporting for the team, insist on a consistent meeting schedule (in-person or virtual), and define what will be done, and when. Sticking to the timetable is a critical success factor. If you set deadlines and start missing them, the team and the program can quickly lose credibility.

Another key issue when building the team is what role the legal department should play. Opinions differ, and there is truly no one right answer. Some social media executive sponsors

are mindful of legal policies, but the legal team does not act as a barrier to implementing a social media program. Others actively involve the legal department. Although social media is evolving so rapidly that it is virtually impossible for any legal department to keep abreast of the changes, including them in the project, at least as an advisor, is probably a good idea.

The social media team needs to act as the organization's voice, so central-

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Reaching New People

From using Twitter to provide updates on road conditions during snow storms to using Facebook to discuss policies, social media has been a valuable communication and customer service tool for the City of Fort Collins, Colorado. Social media has helped the city reach a broad audience beyond those who have the time and inclination to attend public meetings. Social media has allowed city officials to interact with the community in an informal manner and demonstrate that they can be responsive, professional, and human.

The city uses its social media program to communicate online content beyond its website, reaching people who might not even be aware of fcgov.com. For example, when the city launched its own YouTube channel, monthly video downloads increased ten-fold.

Fort Collins has been strategic and purposeful about what it tries to accomplish and what resources it is willing to dedicate to social media. As a result, the city has a manageable but robust program that's bolstered its communications efforts and improved citizen engagement and customer service.

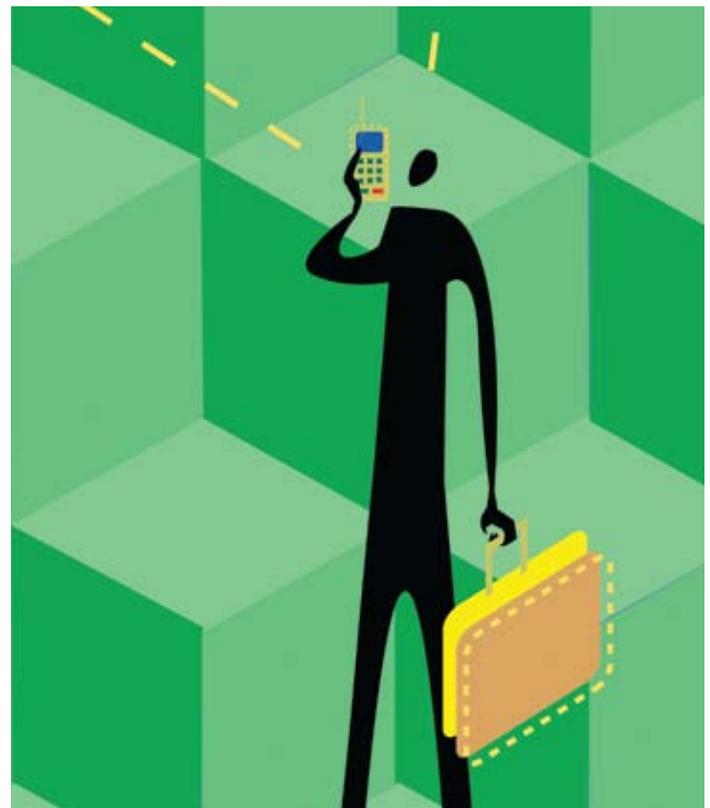
izing this program is critical to its success. Some jurisdictions maintain separate Facebook sites for some departments (e.g., public works, transportation, and parks and recreation), and these pages are not even linked. Centralizing your approach will save time and money while presenting a cohesive, integrated way of communicating with your citizens. That said, it is often appropriate for police and fire organizations to run their own social media sites because of the unique nature of their content — emergency management real-time event updates, tip line information, and so on. However, these should be linked to the organization's main social media sites.

IDENTIFYING GOALS

Identify tangible, measureable goals that are linked to your organization's overall mission and objectives. This should be the easy part, since most organizations publicly share their objectives. Most jurisdictions use some type of performance management program to capture, track, report, and act on their performance metrics. A social media program should be aligned with these metrics, as well as developing new

metrics the organization can use to improve performance and responsiveness. Metrics, both tangible and intangible, also need to be translated into digestible information for your constituents.

Tangible metrics are typically quantitatively based and therefore easier to measure. From a social media perspective, they include number of followers, friends, and re-tweets; hits on YouTube; RSS subscribers; “like” comments on blogs; and new website traffic generated by social media applications. Many jurisdictions use the application or free software programs to measure these metrics. Business intelligence or business analytics applications are available for performing more comprehensive analysis, and as their prices fall, more jurisdictions will start using them, as they can deliver valuable information. For example, one jurisdiction restructured its social media program by “mashing up” or aggregating data from multiple sources because it realized that online forums and YouTube videos formed the strongest, most vocal constituent groups, and that subgroups (or affinity groups) were being created based on mutual interest. This phenomenon is known as crowdsourcing — likeminded people gather to perform tasks, solve complex problems, and contribute relevant and fresh ideas to solve problems. The business intelli-

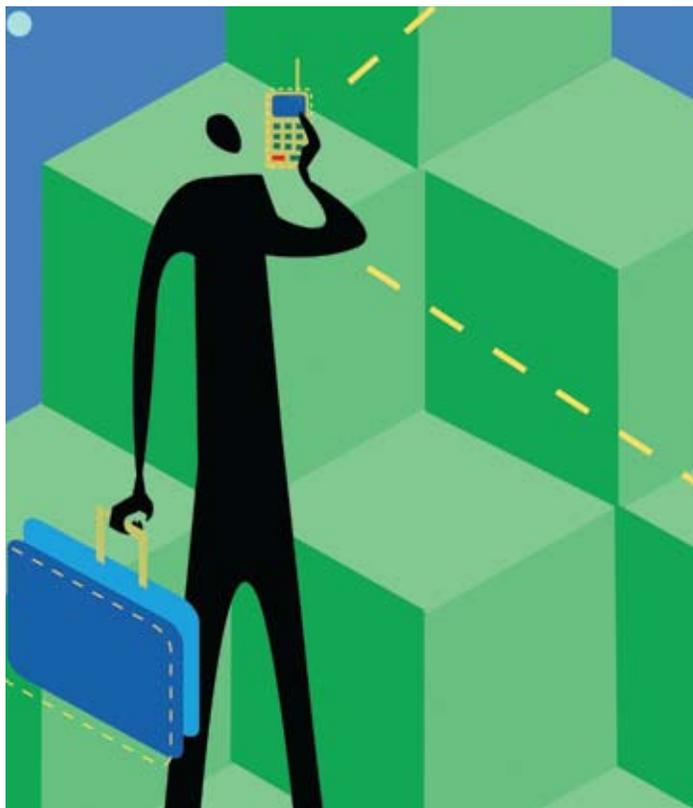


gence software this jurisdiction used was able to successfully demonstrate those connections and to enhance the input the community provided. The affinity groups thus created included avid golfers and constituents who were interested in making their community greener.

Intangible metrics are more difficult to measure but equally important. They include improved transparency; sentiment analysis; support during crisis management; brand awareness and protection; support in market research initiatives and campaign management; and increased constituent satisfaction. Another example is when a jurisdiction is able to lower service delivery costs by shifting transactions to new channels, including self-service.

DEVELOPING GUIDELINES

Someone from the organization's legal department should take the lead in developing social media guidelines. Several jurisdictions have publicly available guidelines, so you can consult these to avoid reinventing the wheel. (Socialmedia.biz provides some public-sector examples at <http://www.socialmedia.biz/social-media-policies/#government>.) At a minimum, your organization's guidelines should address copyright issues, security, adherence to privacy and confiden-



Live Snow Removal Coverage

In January 2011, a massive snowstorm blanketed the Midwest and shut down schools and roads for several days. In Elgin, Illinois, the city manager decided to use Facebook and Twitter to communicate instead of more conventional communication channels. The results were amazing. From the beginning of the blizzard, the city posted nearly 100 messages about its snow removal operations, updates from the National Weather Service, locations of the snow removal vehicles, when streets would be plowed, and when work had to be suspended due to dangerous driving conditions. Adding to the relevancy, most of the posts were made wirelessly as the city manager rode around the city in a snow removal vehicle. Elgin residents clearly appreciated being informed, leaving 50 Facebook comments and nearly 20 likes.

tiality procedures, personal usage by employees, Freedom of Information Act issues, consistency, acceptable use, using appropriate language, posting and review procedures, penalties for noncompliance, and integration with any existing employee code of conduct.

IDENTIFYING TECHNOLOGIES

There are so many social media applications available that listing and defining all would require a separate article. The ones that are well-used by the public sector are:

- Facebook and Twitter — easy to use, monitor, and provide fresh content.
- Online forums and RSS feeds — excellent for sending real-time information to a targeted audience that has opted to participate.
- YouTube — excellent for council meetings, introducing new programs, and municipal events such as festivals and fairs.
- Blogs — easy to update, foster community participation via posting.
- Flickr — excellent for sharing photos of municipal events.
- Mobile applications — provide real-time information that users can digest at their convenience.
- Nixle — primarily used as a notification system for public safety and law enforcement.

Of course, the mix of actual applications will be determined by the social media team, their expertise, budget, and technology skills, all of which must be considered before launching an application.

DEVELOPING A SUSTAINABLE PROCESS

The rapidly evolving nature of social media requires jurisdictions to constantly search for and deploy the most relevant applications. They also need to determine which applications that are currently in use may not be meeting expectations. A social media team needs to develop a process that ensures the organization's social media presence remains relevant. The following steps can help:

- **Manage Incoming Data.** Develop a process for analyzing, reporting, and driving decisions based on the report data.
- **Refresh Content.** Decide who will be responsible for ensuring that content remains fresh, relevant, and topical.
- **Identify Issues.** Decide who will handle any issues regarding executive support, resources, or budget, and who will monitor the content to ensure that both employees and constituents adhere to guidelines and policies.
- **Determine Metrics.** Decide which internal and external metrics will be tracked and reported, keeping in mind that the more information you track, the more confusing and complex it can become to manage it. Creating too

Budgeting Feedback

When the Town of Evanston, Illinois, was experiencing revenue shortfalls in 2011, its city manager looked to social media to engage an already active constituency and secure their feedback on how to address the budget situation. He blogged, set up RSS feeds, and used the city's Facebook and Twitter sites, and all public meetings were posted on YouTube so citizens who could not attend in person were able to follow the proceedings. The city also launched the *Engage Evanston* initiative, supported by social sites and signs throughout the city, to get citizens interested in providing feedback. The city received 100 ideas on how to cut expenses and raise revenues, several of which were voted on by the city council. The community felt involved in the budgeting process, as evidenced by large turnouts in town-sponsored workshops, which were also made available via YouTube.



many metrics can lead to analysis paralysis (when a team spends a significant amount of time collecting data and then becoming so overwhelmed by it that they do not know how to begin analyzing the data and making it useful). Remember the 80/20 rule (i.e., in most situations, 80 percent of the outputs come from 20 percent of the inputs) and focus on the five to seven most important metrics.

- **Keep It Fresh, but On Target.** Keep the team fresh by asking new employees and external vendors to share their perspectives. This can also be a way to get new content. Only post information that is relevant to your organization — no one follows a government site to get sports scores.
- **Refresh Policies.** Periodically review the established guidelines to ensure they remain consistent with your organization's overall mission and objectives.
- **Avoid Mission Creep.** Executive sponsors need to make sure the social media efforts comply with the organization's overall objectives, and make adjustments as needed.

CONCLUSIONS

Governments need to embrace social media as a useful tool for both employees and citizens. By planning carefully and understanding what they want and need from their social

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Citizens Using Mobile Devices for Service Requests

The City of San Francisco is generally recognized as having one of the most sophisticated 311 non-emergency call centers in North America. The call center uses both mobile applications and Twitter to provide constituents with alternative channels for communicating with the city. After the call center was introduced, the city experienced a rapid rise in service requests submitted via mobile devices, which is a very low-cost channel for the city to use in processing these requests. In addition, the mobile application is integrated with the city's constituent relationship management (CRM) application, which ensures that requests will be processed in a timely manner and holds the city accountable for fulfillment. A lower percentage of service requests are arriving via Twitter, but they are also integrated with the CRM application, and the city anticipates that Twitter-generated service requests will grow as the city advertises this channel.

media outlets, organizations can improve transparency, save money, and provide a valuable service. An important emerging trend is how mobile applications help government agencies improve efficiencies, serve citizens more effectively, and make decisions faster. That topic will be explored in a future article, so stay tuned. ■

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