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CONNECTING WITH CONSTITUENTS

HOW CITIES AND TOWNS CAN USE SOCIAL MEDIA

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CONNECTING WITH CONSTITUENTS: HOW CITIES AND TOWNS CAN USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Christopher Rosica

***Affiliation is for purpose of identification. The author bears sole responsibility for the views and interpretations contained in this paper.**

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This is the fourth paper in NJLM Foundation's "Friends of Local Government" Policy Paper series. These papers will offer perspectives and analysis from organizations that are often heard on West State Street, but not necessarily on Main Street.

This paper provides a brief overview of how local officials can utilize the new media and social networking. The Board of the NJLM Educational Foundation thanks the author, and believes you will find this paper informative.

We would also like to note the support of the Foundation's Board for this project, as well as staff from the New Jersey State League of Municipalities, including Bill Dressel and Michael Darcy.

Michael F. Cerra, Policy Advisor
NJLM Educational Foundation
222 West State Street
Trenton, New Jersey 08608
www.njlmef.org

About the Author

Chris Rosica is the CEO of Rosica, Inc., a 29-year-old national public relations and internet marketing agency. The company provides its regional and national clients with online and traditional PR and marketing services including media relations, online social media, reputation management, search engine marketing, media training, cause-related marketing and events/promotions. Rosica's firm has vast business-to-consumer and business-to-business experience in such sectors as energy, healthcare, insurance, government, nonprofit, food, education, financial services and retail. The firm also provides public affairs counsel and support to corporations, nonprofits and lobbying groups. Chris presently serves on the boards of The Ironbound Salvation Army/Boys & Girls Club and the statewide board of Boys & Girls Clubs in New Jersey. He is past president of the New York City Chapter of the Young Entrepreneurs' Organization (YEO), a graduate of Leadership NJ, past advisor to the board of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and served six years on the board of the United Way of Essex and West Hudson. He resides in Wyckoff, New Jersey.

Introduction

What does San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom have in common with Huntsville, Ala., Mayor Tommy Battle? Like many public officials, both mayors have turned to technology to cultivate an ongoing conversation with constituents. They have integrated *social media* into their overall communications platforms to supplement traditional channels of outreach.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that the media landscape has changed dramatically driven by Internet-enabled tools. Readership of conventional print newspapers has fallen, forcing many publications out of business or causing them to offer online versions exclusively. Technology was center stage in the 2008 presidential campaign and pundits believe Obama's savvy use of it gave him a decided edge over McCain. Today, emails and even text messages seem old school. Research shows social media networks are becoming the dominant method for creating content and sharing it, according to the communications agency Universal McCann. But what are social media and social networks?

Defining Today's Media

By now everyone understands the concept of *New Media*—which incidentally has aged fast. New Media encompasses all digital, computerized or networked information and communication technologies. Simply put, new media describes information available online and the tools to get it there.

As a subset of new media, social media is designed to be disseminated through virtual social interaction. Known also as Web 2.0, social media is an umbrella term that defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and content creation. As Wikipedia puts it: "Social media uses Internet and Web-based technologies to transform broadcast media monologues (one to many) into social media dialogues (many to many)." That includes things like blogs—or Web logs—which have proliferated into the many millions as it seems almost everyone and their grandmother posts thoughts and opinions online in a blog.

The modifier *social* media differentiates it from online versions of traditional media outlets written by journalists. Social media includes user-generated content and comprises many different tools besides blogs. An explanation of how a few of the most popular ones are used will clarify what they are.

- ❖ Social networks provide a platform for Internet users to share and receive information with audiences of varying size. Facebook, LinkedIn and, to a far less degree MySpace, dominate the category but there are many social networks in existence globally.
- ❖ Microblogging with an information sharing service like Twitter lets users convey discreet bits of information with others in the network in real time.

- ❖ Social bookmarking, like Digg or StumbleUpon, enables Internet users to share, organize, search, and manage bookmarks of web resources.
- ❖ Video sharing with YouTube or Hulu.
- ❖ Photo sharing with Flickr and similar services.
- ❖ Message boards, podcasts or RSS feeds (Real Simple Syndication).

Social Media Tools Evolving

The social media tools themselves aren't static and sophisticated users typically incorporate elements of one within another giving audiences a rich, multimedia experience. Bloggers, for instance, are uploading video and music. Facebook pages not only can show still photos but YouTube videos as well.

As they have grown and evolved, the tools are serving purposes probably not foreseen by their creators. Facebook started as a service for university students but now almost one-third of its global audience is aged 35-49 years of age and almost one-quarter is over 50, according to The Nielson Company. Mayor Newsom abandoned the traditional "behind-the-podium" annual State of the City Address in 2008 and instead delivered a series of Webisodes on a YouTube channel. The format allowed him to solicit feedback from San Francisco residents and offer replies in subsequent installments.

How Social Media is Being Used

The ways individuals, organizations and government entities are using social media are as limitless as the imagination. Cities and towns considering the use of social media and uncertain whether to pursue it can review how the federal government and others have capitalized on it.

The Central Intelligence Agency has a Facebook page to recruit new agents. The Library of Congress has a Flickr stream to share photos from the Library's collections with people who might not visit the Library's Website. The Department of Homeland Security has a Hurricane Information Widget to get weather updates to everyone who needs to know. The Pentagon operates TroopTube to put members of the armed forces and their loved ones in touch with one another through videos. The Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have teamed up to create YouTube channels that provide a searchable database of recalled products and they've used other social media campaigns during problems including the Salmonella Typhimurium outbreak in January 2009.

At the state level, numerous elected officials maintain a presence on Facebook and many "tweet" on Twitter regularly. In case you've missed out on the Twitter trend so far, here's how it works. The creators of Twitter define it as a service for friends, family and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing? But do not be misled; people communicate much more than their personal schedules or experiences. People are using it to comment on breaking news developments and share random insights and opinions.

Each message—or “tweet”—is limited to 140 characters. California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has been a prominent Twitterer, soliciting feedback from residents about solving the state’s budget crisis. He raised eyebrows, however, when he was seen in a video link posted on Twitter wielding a scary-looking knife meant to show that he was serious about slashing the budget. He was criticized for making light of the budget cuts that have been difficult to accept by many state residents. So, the lesson is, think before tweeting (or blogging).

Be Wary of the Information You Share

Schwarzenegger isn’t alone in courting controversy by posting objectionable content for all to see. Today Show weatherman Al Roker committed a gaffe in reporting for jury duty when he snapped pictures of potential jurors on his iPhone and posted them to his Twitter page. The *New York Post* tabloid headlined his violation of court rules: “What a Twit.”

Avoiding pratfalls like Roker’s isn’t difficult if users of all types of social media and social networks keep a few points in mind and develop—and stick to—sound usage policies. Rule No. 1 is remembering that anything online potentially can be seen by anybody. This goes for material posted to password-protected, membership-only sites because once something is on the Internet, it is out of the control of whoever put it there in the first place. Consider anything sent to the Internet as in the public domain. Also, plan your communiqués as you would speeches, news releases and op-ed pieces.

Without getting into the finer points of making posts interesting enough for others to want to read them or how to attract followers on Twitter, there are some basics that everyone should keep in mind about social media. Guidance from countless gadget gurus abounds online but before delving into it, think about what you want to achieve by establishing a presence in social media networks.

How Social Media Can Serve Municipal Interests

For city and town governments, social media can be a great way to connect with constituents and give them useful information. It supplements already existing communication channels such as newsletters sent via traditional direct mail. In emergencies, like a water main break or road repairs requiring detours, it can quickly deliver necessary news to people who might not be home to take the automated call from the reverse 911 system. As an educational tool, social media provides a forum to fully explain everything from complicated legislative proposals to basic housekeeping topics, like a new trash collection schedule. Residents can comment on local government issues, ask questions, seek additional information and resolve problems.

Some dos and don’ts will help social media newcomers get started without making blunders. By taking proper precautions and following carefully developed protocols, municipal governments can reap real benefits from having a social media presence.

- **Do:** Present informative, fact-based material in a professional tone.
- **Don't:** Provide misleading information intended to pursue a hidden agenda.
- **Do:** Be authentic and transparent in the purpose of communication.
- **Don't:** Share personal opinions or overly personal information in profiles.
- **Do:** Establish a dialogue, engaging in two-way virtual conversations; “listen” and respond to commentators.
- **Don't:** Use social media as a personal bully pulpit; it's not a “show and tell” situation.
- **Do:** Ignore extremist crackpots (there are always some of them out there).
- **Don't:** Criticize detractors or get defensive.
- **Do:** Avoid emotionally charged language.
- **Don't:** Take personal offense at anything posted in the comments section of a blog or Facebook page.
- **Do:** Regularly post fresh content because social media is an ongoing process.
- **Don't:** Allow outdated information to linger on the Internet.
- **Do:** Be realistic about what you can accomplish because maintaining a good blog or becoming popular on Twitter takes real work.
- **Don't:** Jump into social media without a plan.
- **Do:** Manage the conversation by being proactive and reaching out to people in ways made possible by today's communications options.

Why Strike Up a “Conversation”?

The Pew Internet and American Life Project estimates that 79% of American adults regularly use the Internet with social media networks increasingly the preferred choice of the masses. This doesn't mean every small village, large city and everything in between should hire a “Town Tweeter.” But it does mean municipalities need to utilize social media to effectively broaden their communications reach.