

## **Using Social Media in Local Government**

by Karen Pinkos, Assistant City Manager, El Cerrito, CA

As a regular user of Twitter and other social media in my professional life and for our City, I have led sessions at conferences, given talks, contributed to articles, and had numerous conversations with colleagues about the use of social media and its role in local government. I frequently joke that this is the same conversation we had twenty years ago about websites for cities: should we do it? Do we have time? What about the legal ramifications? How on earth will we deal with all the responses?

In the same way that cities, and in fact all levels of government, have embraced the use of websites to the point where not having one is unimaginable, so goes social media. In fact, cities that don't already utilize a form of social media are already far behind. As our citizens demand better service, rapid responsiveness, and greater use of technology, social media is an indispensable tool for a local government to use to communicate with and between the citizens we serve. Social media allows agencies to reach more people, creates confidence and trust in local government, provides instant communication, and most importantly, improves transparency.

There are literally thousands of articles, studies, and missives on social media in government out there for managers to peruse, so I won't try to reinvent any wheels with this essay. I will, however, share my thoughts regarding the use of social media as of this point in time, realizing that with the pace of technology, in about ten minutes my words may be obsolete.

A frequently asked question: Do I have time to manage social media? How do I know it's having an impact so that I'm not wasting my time?

Good question. Do you answer the phone? Do you return messages? Do you answer email? Do you speak to members of the public who stop by your city hall? The answer, then, should be obvious: it is not wasting your time to communicate with a member of the public in any other form or fashion, and social media is no different. Of course, it does require a bit of staff time, just like any other form of communication. There are multiple tools that can assist you (for example, for Twitter there are online tools such as TweetDeck or HootSuite), but with the ease of the technology available, you can truly have a good social media presence with not a lot of effort.

I believe the best way to view social media for government is that it is another tool in our toolbox to communicate with the public and even to gauge public opinion. It enhances our customary forms of communication and allows local government the ability to engage with more people than the traditional forms of outreach—and it is immediate. The great part is that, for the most part, the technology is free. Gathering metrics on how people use your social media (i.e., followers, number of clicks, use of hashtags, etc.) can be useful in how we are reaching people and even to target messages, but to me that is almost beside the point. Regardless of statistics or popularity at a given moment, social media has become a necessary form of communication, and local governments need to make it available.

### **Social Media: it's MEDIA**

Think about the second word: how do you already use the media to get out your city's message? Do you do press releases? Talk to reporters? Do op-eds in your local paper? Social media is just that: a more social, immediate form of traditional *media*, a method to communicate to and from the public, and a way to get your message out to the people you serve. In the same

vein, it is necessary for local governments to react appropriately to what is out there on social media in the same way we do traditional media: don't overreact, don't get defensive, stay on point, give the facts, and engage wisely.

Will you control your message, or will your message control you?

Social media is instantaneous. With this immediacy, however, there is a tendency for participants to place the priority on speed as opposed to accuracy. Train your users, then, to recognize your city as the true source of any information in order to prevent others co-opting your message for you. Do this by:

- Creating official and recognizable social media pages, sites and accounts so that there is no disputing that the messages are authorized messages of your agency
- Directing messages to an official city source—your website—so that you are reinforcing the message as well as allowing the website to be the forum where you can elaborate and provide fact checks
- Resisting the urge to link to an article on another website (such as a newspaper) in place of your own message—again, you want users to see YOU as the source of accurate information, not an outside website.

Social media can also be incredibly valuable in emergency situations, for notifications, and for making timely information quickly available to the public. This adds to the importance of making sure you have established your agency's official accounts as the true source of information in order to lessen the chance for rumors and inaccurate reporting, allowing you to be proactive instead of having to do damage control.

### **Oh, Those Comments**

Comments are a blessing and a curse in today's technologically savvy local government world. While they are a valuable way for us to get a feel of what people are thinking and can be used as a measure of feedback, they can also tend to bring out hateful, vitriolic, strange, or offbeat opinions—and easily get under our (and our elected officials') skin. Take a deep breath: these are not different from any other comments that you receive at a City Council meeting during public comment, or via email or regular mail, or that random letter to the editor that criticizes you, your work, your family, and how you dress. It is just that: a comment. Of course, it is received in an immediate format, seen by many more people, and could be from someone who doesn't give their name...and that can be frustrating. But take what is said with an objective eye, and also consider that even bitter comments can be useful. You can't control what people say online, but you can control your reaction. Resist the urge to be defensive to negative online comments as you would with any other form of public comment. Be cognizant of the fact that you set expectations by the way you respond (or don't respond) to comments, both positive and negative. It is wise to be consistent in your treatment of online comments via the web or social media with the way that you receive public comments in any other format, and as with traditional media, react appropriately.

It is also critical to have a good comments policy as well as a comprehensive social media policy for your city's official social media outlets, so that you can be consistent with your messages as well as the treatment of comments on the sites for which you are responsible. Look online for examples and work with your attorney to develop a policy that allows an appropriate forum for public comment.

Remember, technology is trending to be more social, open, and transparent, and there's no going back. The demand to communicate with local government via social media is already here, and it's only going to increase. Just like with email and websites once upon a time, social media and other technological tools are not optional anymore, they are vital. Make sure you are ahead of the game before it gets ahead of you.

## Resources and Links

League of California Cities

<http://www.cacities.org/Resources/Social-Media>

Western city articles

<http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/June-2011/Meet-Twitter-Social-Media-for-City-Officials-Short-on-Time/>

<http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/June-2010/Social-Media-and-Public-Agencies-Legal-Issues-You-Should-Know-About/>

<http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/August-2011/Social-Media-Balancing-The-Rights-of-Employers-And-Employees/>

<http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/June-2011/Getting-the-Most-Out-of-Electronic-Communication/>

<http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/June-2012/Putting-Technology-to-Work/>

Institute for Local Government

<http://www.ca-ilg.org/social-media-and-blogs>

Sample Social Media Policies: <http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/sample-social-media-policies>

Legal Issues: [http://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/social\\_media\\_11-13\\_0.pdf](http://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/social_media_11-13_0.pdf)

ICMA

Social Media Handbook, available to ICMA members for free, non members for 4.95:

[http://icma.org/en/Page/100423/Social\\_Media\\_Local\\_Government\\_Playbook](http://icma.org/en/Page/100423/Social_Media_Local_Government_Playbook):

Knowledge Network (free to sign up as a user, even if not an ICMA member):

[http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge\\_network/topics/kn/Topic/281/Social\\_Media](http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge_network/topics/kn/Topic/281/Social_Media)

NLC

Planning for Stronger Local Democracy Toolkit: discusses civic engagement in general and technology specifically as a tool to strengthen local government: <http://www.nlc.org/find-city-solutions/city-solutions-and-applied-research/governance-and-civic-engagement/democratic-governance-and-civic-engagement/planning-for-stronger-local-democracy>