

Using Social Media for Government Communications: A Closer look at this Popular Communication Outlet and its use in the Local Government Sector

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Abstract: Social media can be a marketer's dream with the ability to engage, collect research and communicate information quickly and to a large number of people. This is likely why so many businesses have jumped on board enjoying this communication outlet after seeing its popularity from a socializing aspect. In recent years, we have found this mode of communication to begin gaining popularity in the government sector. Many politicians are using this platform to communicate, gain popularity and even gauge consumer response. This paper takes an in depth look at government communications and political use of social media focusing on a local government level. This paper explores some of the apprehensions with utilizing this platform and strategies to mitigate problems. Finally, this paper also looks at how to implement a social media policy for local governments who don't currently employ a strategy.

Keywords: Social media, Local Government, Strategy, Marketing

1. Background

Much like the other 69% of Americans you are likely on the social media platform Facebook. (Lardieri,2019) This can be a great outlet for socializing with peers, accessing information, keeping in touch and of course communicating. After social media first had its reign as a great place for socializing the outlet took off a bit in other directions. Businesses began using the platform to engage, collect research and spread information. Not too long after businesses began employing this outlet, we began seeing politicians using this form of communication. Unlike the success in the socializing world and in the business world the political use of this tool has been a bit more controversial. While some politicians are employing this outlet, other government agencies are hesitant to employ this outlet still maintaining that social media has no place in the political world. Some even recommending that anyone involved in politics stay off of social media altogether. This paper explores the many benefits that can come from using social media in a governmental capacity focusing on local government. Furthermore, it explores some areas of concern with using social media in government, and finally will focus on how to properly implement a social media plan.

Social media became a big part of the political scene during the 2016 United States presidential election There were many pros to hearing directly from candidates on their platforms. It provided an additional outlet to become educated. It encouraged many to share, retweet and comment on relevant topics. It furthered discussion on many pertinent topics, helped candidates gain popularity and really made politics a household conversation. This radical change in politics as we know it was also met with many challenges. "Social media provided government parties and their candidates with public platforms to share their opinions online, directly connect with supporters and have audiences discuss political issues – however, for the first time in U.S. elections, social media also played a major role in targeting specific groups of voters with tailored advertising and fake news in order to disrupt public support for leading political candidates; confusing and destabilizing their groups of supporters and drowning legitimate discussions by automated bot postings ." (Clement, 2019)

Varying and opposite opinions were regularly shared and debated. Untrue facts from unreliable sources were shared. Many people were under the opinion that social media entering into politics was dividing the nation. Unfortunately, this opinion has caused some people to feel that social media has no place in politics forgetting the many benefits that this platform can provide when implemented correctly.

Looking at this topic on smaller scale, local government can use this platform and capitalize on the many advantages that engaging with the public can bring. At a rudimentary level, utilizing popular social media platforms can provide one more platform to communicate information to the public. These can be simple things such as upcoming road work or a water boil advisory. As social media has gained popularity many local governments have found out there are many things, they can do on this platform beside routine announcements that they are making in other places. "Today, citizens expect social media accounts to be less formal and bi-

directional tools that they can use to contact local governments with questions and inquiries, provide feedback, and take part in critical and formative dialogue. This expectation is motivating many communities to use social media in more innovative and engaging ways.” (Civicplus,2019)

This level of engagement that can occur if social media is used correctly can be one of the best ways to collect information from constituents. So, while this platform does make for a great place to make additional announcements the ability to engage, collect feedback and connect with the community is something that is not easily done via other outlets. One area that many government offices and businesses struggle with in social media is failing to plan. Social media just like every other area of the organization should have formal plan, policy, person or persons in charge of it, metrics and expectations.

There should be specific guidelines as to what the expectation should be. The engagement aspect will vary depending on the size of the municipality. Larger municipalities with multiple social media experts may set an expectation much higher than a smaller municipality with one employee handling social media.

2. Literature Review

Local governments exist to represent constituents at a local level. Their job is to ensure they are hearing the constituent’s concerns, providing solutions, keeping constituents informed and doing this all in a transparent fashion. With this said, it is important that the local government is responding to changing consumer trends and expectations. "By some accounts two out of every three adults gets their news from social media," added Ruhil. "Almost everyone is on Twitter or Instagram or Facebook. So why would any entity use some other means of disseminating information, of connecting its people, maybe even gathering information?" (Suciu, 2019) Understanding how many people are accessing information can be an important first step in getting local governments to communicate with their constituents in the best fashion. Businesses have broken the stigma that social media is just for socializing, but it is important that governments do the same.

One of the many benefits that constituents can enjoy from a local government participating in social media is access to current events and upcoming community happenings. There are also many benefits from the governmental standpoint. “Local governments can if they don’t already send out information about breaking events from road closures to emergency information.”. (Suciu, 2019) The ability to inform constituents of the breaking events, like these, can help emergency responders work in a less interrupted fashion, can best mitigate traffic concerns and can lead for and overall more seamless practice for dealing with emergency situations. Social media can in fact be one of the best ways to communicate this type of breaking information, due to its immediacy.

One area focused on heavily in a business capacity is the importance of engagement. This can also be important from a governmental standpoint, as well. Voicing concerns, giving feedback and getting necessary information to pertinent question are all just the tip of the iceberg for benefits from the consumer standpoint. From a governmental standpoint, the engagement is also very important. As previously mentioned, local government exists to represent constituents at a local level. What better way to connect and understand concerns than using social media to gather feedback? As many businesses have realized, this level of connection can not only gather feedback, but is cost efficient.

Another area of benefit can come from participation. It is often noted that the younger generations are not as “involved” as some of their older counterparts. Could this possibly be a negative consequence of using antiquated communication practice? Using modern technology for communication may help to get more people involved of all ages.

Looking through the Facebook account of the city of Los Angeles, it’s easy to see how this benefits their community. They have posted changing laws, police information, community events, and allows consumers to engage and comment on various topics. While many local governments like New York City and Los Angeles embrace this avenue for connecting with their constituents. Other communities are still hesitant to employ this communication strategy.

This next section will explore some of the concerns that local governments may have and various strategies to mitigate these concerns.

There are endless examples of social media being able to bridge a gap in communication for local government officials. "After a deadly mudslide wiped out telephone poles, Snohomish County, Wash., used Facebook to connect a devastated community to vital resources. TikTok helps the city of Minneapolis raise awareness about the 2020 Census in a friendly, compelling way. In Maryland, teens and young adults provide marketing feedback on school safety materials via Instagram Stories. (Hsiung, 2020).

Although there have been many success stories as noted above, many municipalities are still hesitant to take the plunge. Governments and their officials must be taken seriously. Social media costs money. Who will monitor the account? These are some of the many reasons why local governments are hesitant to employ this platform. So, is it worth it to begin a social media strategy? Hsiung argues, "Even with all its nuances and intricacies, social media fundamentally facilitates government transparency."

From a professional standpoint, it is important to note that social media is not the casual communication platform for friends to keep in touch as it once was designed to be. Social media has a relevant and important place in the business world. It has become a respected platform for communication from celebrities, government officials and businesses around the world. "Residents of our communities have been introduced to, and have come to appreciate, how social media can elevate their connectivity to their local governments." (Hsiung, 2020)

Something else to remember, is that all governments do not have to employ a very large social media strategy like major cities do. The larger the government, the more resources they have and the more employees they have. Smaller municipalities may not be able to or need to provide as extravagant of plan to achieve similar goals. All governments have constituents, so these can be a way to engage with them. "Local politicians should also look to social media as a way to connect with the local constituents. Just as local government officials may pound the pavement and press the flesh, they should take to Twitter and Facebook as a way to build recognition with voters." (Sucio, 2019)

3. Mitigating concerns

Anyone who has spent time on social media knows a certain level of caution needs to be employed when posting using this communication outlet. The immediacy of delivery sometimes means that that posts are less proofread, researched or thought-out when compared to other media outlets. Once these are posted, they can be shared, retweeted and screenshot. So even with the ability to edit a post, it does not give the writer or entity the ability to truly erase what was said.

There are many cautionary tails of what "not to do" when it comes to social media posting. This includes on a personal level, business level and governmental level. One concern with writing of any kind is with the absence of tone, it is not always easy to best understand humour. One light-hearted joke, could really cause community damage. One misspelled word could make people feel that their local government is less competent. One wrong fact, could make local government seem less truthful. With the many benefits of social media, we need to also understand that small missteps can be very damaging to the reputation of the local government.

Before any government begins with an implementation strategy, a proper social media policy should be in place. This should address some of the concerns above. This policy includes who oversees the social media page. It is advisable to limit how many people oversee this page. This allows for additional control and consistency in use. The social media writer should be well versed in the importance of privacy laws as well as well as an understanding of what can and cannot be shared/posted on the governmental page. They should also be advised and coached on ensuring they talk with the correct department for accurate information. They should not be attempting to advise constituents in areas that are not their expertise.

While humour and personal style may be permissible, it is important to write in a manner that is concise and can be understood. This includes omitting personal opinion, avoiding generalizations and not using slang. Not only is avoiding slang important, it is also important to proofread, and fact check everything. This is coming from the local government and should be trusting source.

Another area of concern is consumer engagement. While this is one of the biggest benefits for a social media page there needs to be ground rules for both community members and the local government. First off, it's

important to decide if the governmental agency is going to allow posts from the community on the page or if they are going to only allow comments on original posts. While either strategy can be beneficial, allowing public posts will require careful monitoring to ensure appropriate content is only being shared. If the government entity cannot provide this level of monitoring it is advisable to not allow. This is a time where it is important to understand the level of commitment and resource that they have to offer their social media policy.

Appropriate response time to engagement should be communicated to the public. Major cities with large social media presence may be able to provide rather quick feedback. For smaller communities this “round the clock” interaction is likely not possible. The communication and feedback timeline should be communicated. For constituent that required faster turnaround time should be contact information and hours of operation so they can communicate in another fashion.

Employee consequences for misuse of social media should also be communicated. While it is the hopes of anyone engaging in this type of communication that their employees are a good reflection of the company, there does need to be ground rules and consequences for any employee who has the ability to communicate via social media on behalf of the government entity.

It’s important to understand that while social media may seem like a casual way to communicate, it needs to be treated similarly to all other areas of operations. This is a direct reflection of the agency and it should be understood that any communication using this platform should not be taken lightly. Following these suggestions can help to mitigate a lot of the concern around government agencies engaging in social media.

4. Implementing a social media policy for local government

The following areas should be included when implementing a social media policy in local government. It is encouraged to start the use of social media after a formal plan is written deciding how and when the social media should be utilized, who will be running the social media and also what the expectations for the platform(s) being used will be. The following should be discussed in detail in the policy:

Information: Start by using this platform to post any information that you are already communicating with the public and share it on this platform as well. This includes information such as bulky item day, changes to the municipality, and upcoming events. Anything that you are communicating on other platforms should be communicated via social media as well. This should be fairly easy to do as this information is likely already typed up and proofread. So, this is an easy first areas to start with.

Time sensitive information: This type of information is often tricky for local governments who do not employ social media. The use of flyers and mailers do not provide a great outlet for time sensitive information. Therefore, this information is often communicated by other local entities and it is not always communicated correctly. Once a social media policy is written, the local government should expect to add some time sensitive information to the page. This can include road closures, accidents, warnings and last-minute changes such as cancelations due to weather.

Departmental efforts can easily be included in the social media efforts. If other departments such as the recreation or the police department have pages, information from these pages should be regularly shared. In the event that they do not have their own pages pertinent upcoming events should be shared and promoted on the governmental page. “The more your citizens, businesses and visitors know about what your government is doing, the more likely they are to take part—whether that’s in town halls and council meetings, fundraisers, or other municipal events.”(5 social media strategies for Gov engagement, n.d.)

Upcoming meetings, itineraries for the meetings and a follow up with minutes should be posted on the page. This should be done in a consistent fashion. For example, the itinerary is posted 48 hours prior to all scheduled meetings and the minutes are shared with the public within 48 hours after the meeting. This can help keep consumers engaged, informed and also assist with transparency.

Engagement protocol must be identified and communicated. What are the goals and expectations for engagement? For example, what type of response time can the public expect to receive. It is important to be realistic in this depending on staffing for this department. If response time is going to be 24+ hours, it is perfectly

acceptable to have to communicated on the social media page. This will ensure the public knows what to expect. "Tracking conversion and engagement allows you to analyze the success of your efforts and reevaluate if needed. Setting clear goals helps to ensure that your marketing strategy stays on track." (Mohajer, 2020)

Tips on pertinent topics should be shared an ongoing basis. This should be information that may not be fully understood by the public, or information that makes the community a better place. Examples, of what can be recycled or what cannot be recycled are topics that may prove worthwhile to the public. This area would also include any type of seasonal information such as expectations on snow removal.

Collecting information via surveys. This platform can provide the entity a platform to collect information directly from the constituents. This can help gauge interest in specific activities and collect information about unmet needs. It should be communicated with the public that information collected off social media will only be used to help guide the local officials.

Avoid engaging heavily with upset constituents in a public forum. These constituents should be referred to the appropriate department head for a private conversation. It is also important to avoid answering specific questions that may be outside the social media writer's expertise. Again, referring the individual to the appropriate department head would be the recommend course of action.

5. Conclusion

Social media has proven to be successful in many different areas of the business and social world, but many government officials are still hesitant to employ a strategy. The benefits can certainly be transferred over to local government officials if handled properly. Like all other areas of government social media needs to have a plan, policy and designated moderator. The social media writer should be careful never to speak outside their area of expertise and clearly communicate the engagement expectations for the public. It is important to remember that a government agency does not need to go from having no policy to having a very active profile. It is encouraged to treat this platform just like any other new business practice. Start small by getting your feet wet. This trial period can really be advantageous in understanding the level of commitment needed, the right person to do the job, and some problem-solving strategies for issues that may come up. It may even be advisable to create a timeline in your social media plan to best implement in appropriate steps. Overall, if properly planned and monitored, social media can be a great addition to the local government sector's tool belt. It can benefit both constituents and the local government. This paper servers to better identify the pros of utilizing this method, and tips for getting social media efforts started for local governments.

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