



Navigating the Social Media Landscape of Government 2.0

October 28th, 2011 Guest post by SMB member Doug Tangwall

Our latest Social Media Breakfast-Madison event featured a lively discussion with a diverse and distinguished panel, representing public officials and government, business and nonprofit leaders who use social media (as well as other avenues) to advance political policy, economic development and social outreach.

Grassroots Social Media

Most of the panelists described their use of social media in a governmental context as a relatively new venture. Neil Stechschulte, who works with economic development for the [city of Sun Prairie](#), explains, “We just jumped in to it. We provided updates on project progress during our Main Street interchange construction. And we went to the chamber of commerce and told them we want to feature one business-related story for every calendar day in 2011. This generated some discussion and a lot of interest.”



Governmental social media can be powerful.
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“Sun Prairie is a good place to do business, and the word is getting out,” Stechschulte says. “Not just locally, but in major Midwestern cities with potential employers and employees that are expanding and relocating.” The effort has dramatically increased coverage from regional media and year-on-year blog traffic is up 164%. He adds, “Some doubters said there was no way Project 365 would work, but as of today, we’ve run 355 stories, 55 ahead of schedule.”

The Official Status of Government Empowers Social Media

Scott Resnick, council member for the [city of Madison](#), says, “Unlike corporations, it’s easy for government to get people to follow us on Twitter and ‘like’ us on Facebook. Our social media posts are viewed as quasi-media or journalism.”

As a result, governmental social media messaging can be quite powerful. For example, when the city recently received a \$5 million grant for alternative transportation initiatives, traditional media appeared to have no interest. One Facebook update caused Resnick's phone to ring "almost immediately."

Government 2.0 as an Economic Engine

Just as Sun Prairie uses its social media clout to bring in new businesses, Andrew (Drew) Nussbaum attracts travelers as president of the [Columbia County Visitor's Bureau](#) and works with Juneau, Sauk, Green Lake, Marquette, and Dodge counties as well to assist their tourism marketing efforts. "People used to research their vacation at home. Now they decide where they're going from their hotel bed. Social media and smart phones are definitely changing the way we promote tourism in Wisconsin." Nussbaum uses Twitter, Facebook, Google+ and Tumblr to promote events, and share photos and information. "Our fastest growing group," he says, "is the 'silver surfers,' retirees who use mobile social media; they often show up after seeing pictures from past events." Nussbaum also notes that social media, emails and texts are great for fund-raising with the chamber of commerce and community business leaders.

Kathy Marks, managing partner at [TMA + Peritus](#), a content marketing and web development company that enables government and social agencies to tackle economic development initiatives, says, "Almost universally, we are dealing with limited funding and resources, so infrastructure is key." She notes that most government websites are "closed and not able to be updated without gatekeepers." Marks starts by listening to all stakeholders, then develops platforms and dashboards to maximize the time and impact of small teams. "It is great to see the freedom of expression that blooms when staff has real-time access to social media. They create great events. And as they tell their story, a real grassroots approach begins to take hold."

An Integrative Approach to Social Outreach

Panelist Jennifer Smith is a social media and marketing strategist who has held stints with [Thrive](#), a public-private partnership that seeks to provide resources to advance business within an eight-county region, and more recently with the [University of Wisconsin Extension's Office of Broadband Sustainability](#), charged with implementing two federal grants totaling \$32.3 million: the first, to expand community capacity and to connect public anchor institutions in four rural Wisconsin areas by building community-owned fiber optic networks; the second, to conduct outreach and education in five communities to bridge the digital divide and bring disconnected citizens into the communities' social and economic mainstream.

Smith takes an integrated approach to social outreach initiatives, combining video and pictures from community events and webinars with tweets, Facebook updates and blog posts. This yields more coverage from traditional media which can then be reposted via social media. She notes, "The organic growth and

shared messages resulting from this approach gained a lot of media attention for Thrive. With the Wisconsin Broadband initiative, many in our target audience don't have access to the Internet, so we use social media for broader community and media awareness in conjunction with a traditional and non-traditional offline promotion—postering kiosks, door-to-door outreach, electronic scrolling ads, pre-movie theatre promotions, earned and paid media, etc., taking care to integrate messages across online and offline platforms.”

Avoiding the Pitfalls of Politicized Social Media

Resnick explains, “We are racing to stay ahead of social media and many questions arise when something new or unusual happens. For example, when a university student was injured during the homecoming parade, we had limited knowledge of the situation, but people expected us to post real-time information. But the Madison police department has its own Twitter account, and it was unclear where departmental lines are drawn and even what we could say from an official capacity.”

In Government 2.0, the relatedness factor that makes many social circles hum, creating many homogeneous communities with similar values, is a little different. Here, the trade-off creates a broad cross section representing diverse points of view.

Not having everyone see eye to eye can generate a “hum” of its own, increasing the potential for misunderstanding and conflict. Resnick advises politicians to keep their official capacity in mind whenever posting and to strive for clarity with every message. “For more complex issues,” he advises, “this means selecting social platforms that provide appropriate context.”

Resnick cites one example where the social conversation around a plan to remove a single park bench devolved into claims that all the park benches on State Street would be removed and that the plan was targeted at homeless people. This emotional component of Government 2.0, Resnick cautions, “means social media comments alone are not often an accurate gauge of public sentiment.”

“There are new paradigms at work that government isn't used to,” says Resnick. “The city's attorneys are used to dealing with land rights or eminent domain, not social media. Their preference probably would be that we don't use it. But social media represents a substantial opportunity for government to provide quality information and to get its message out to a large audience—and its benefits outweigh the combined, well-intentioned concerns of the lawyers.”

Bringing It All Together: Best-practice Advice for Governmental Social Media

The panel shared similar views around several key areas of concern when using social media in a governmental context:

Privacy Concerns

The federal government is an “ask for permission, not for forgiveness” culture, so things like having citizenry pictures appear in federal government-funded project material (on- or offline) means being very careful about obtaining permissions. Smith says, “Our outreach coordinators carry permission slips to every event and take a lot of pictures of people’s backs.”

Resnick says, “We have people say they don’t want their picture posted when they’re standing among hundreds at a public event.”

Bottom line: Nussbaum advises honoring any request to take down a photo. He says, “You may be within your legal rights, but it’s easier to take it down and make them happy.”

The Legal Environment

Resnick warns Government 2.0 users about copyright concerns and the potential for litigation. For example, a public artwork may be covered by copyright law. Taking a picture and posting it on social media may infringe upon the artist’s rights. Further, if a government employee posts the photo on a site such as Flickr, he may unwittingly transfer those copyrights to a third party.

Open records requests are another legal concern. Stechschulte says, “When we launched this initiative, our IT department said, ‘Assume everything is a public record, and we have to retain it all.’”

Bottom line: Always keep legal issues in mind when posting and obtain written permission for intended uses of copyrighted materials. Information technology infrastructure can be used to protect government interests by storing social media posts that may be subject to open-records laws and to facilitate staff time and resources by making it easier to leverage its benefits.

Personal Opinion Versus Official Position

The official status of governmental social media means posts carry more weight.

Bottom line: Use disclaimers and be clear about whether posts represent personal opinions or official stances. And Resnick advises Wisconsin

politicians, “Think before you post. It’s not just politicians in New York that say stupid things on Twitter.”

Controversy

While Government 2.0 can cause controversy when not used properly, it can also be a tool to facilitate debate and to achieve understanding.

Bottom line: Use social media to provide a voice of reason in responding to criticism and controversy, and to clarify public positions.

Location-based Considerations

The panelists feel the dynamics of social media vary for city, county, regional, statewide and national efforts.

Bottom line: Recognize the scope of personal connections and match it to your social communications. The tight personal social circles that exist in small communities may carry over into social media, but this aspect is less prevalent as the scope of government and social initiatives is expanded. Likewise, leveraging personal connections for fund-raising with members of the chamber of commerce may allow a tool like texting to work.

Integration

Smith says, “Social media is an additional avenue to get your message out. It doesn’t replace the old ways of doing things.”

Bottom line: Use social and traditional media in ways that “play off of each other” to maximize impact.

Growing Up

When the wild-west days of social media are seen by more eyes, a transitional period to a more formalized approach inevitably takes place. Stechschulte says they are using their IT staff to informally cover policy guidelines and common sense as they set up new users, “but a social media policy guiding content and communication, not just the hardware and software side of things, is eventually going to be needed.”

Bottom line: Inner- and cross-agency policies can be used to define who will speak in an official capacity for different situations, as well as escalation procedures during emergencies or moments of controversy.

Governmental social media can be used to quickly get a message to a large audience, to engage and to gain feedback on public policy and social initiatives. Government 2.0 can generate coverage in traditional media channels, build strong grassroots campaigns and may even bring us closer to true democracy. But its path may be slippery at times, as users operate within a broad spectrum

<http://socialmediabreakfastmadison.com/navigating-the-social-media-landscape-of-government-2-0-recap-smb-madison-oct-2011/>

of viewpoints and in an environment that is sometimes supercharged with emotion.

Government 2.0 users: Would you care to comment on the subject?

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