SMALL TOWNS THRIVE

Social Media Guidance Document

The Small Towns Thrive initiative helps communities build local capacity, create connections and address needs that are unique to smaller towns. The program has three areas of focus: education, peer learning and technical services, all aimed at empowering community staff and fostering efficient, effective and resilient governance.

Small Towns Thrive Guidance Document: Social Media

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Introduction

In the current era of governance, communications as a discipline has evolved from writing reports and leaving bulletins on the community board to the new trend of "e-government," where municipalities are expected to maintain an active presence in the digital world via social media and their own websites.

This can be a challenging topic for many municipalities, as it requires tech-savvy employees, an intimate knowledge of how the used platforms function, navigating the legal pitfalls and how to maximize the impact of your work.

Centralina Regional Council analyzed the literature on social media usage for local governments and is ready to help you navigate this topic. Items covered include:

1. The benefits of social media and a municipality website.
2. Best practices for social media usage.
3. Recommended codes of conduct for both staff and elected officials.
4. Challenges that you may experience, and how to navigate them.
5. Examples from peer communities of successful social media engagements.

What does this mean for small communities?

For smaller communities, it may seem that this is outside of the scope of work for you – perhaps you feel that the residents of your community do not use social media, are not tech savvy enough to access your website, or that this is not a reasonable use of your staff's limited capacity. For smaller communities, however, effective communication strategies can be a phenomenal tool for working past these limitations, getting the message out to a difficult-to-reach members of the community and helping to promote your community to the region around you.

Social Media for Small Municipalities

Benefits of Social Media

Fast, relevant information. Having a social media presence for your municipality can allow you to disperse up-to-date information to your community. Many municipalities will provide updates on matters such as police assistance, severe weather updates, public service announcements, town hall meetings and construction updates. This can be helpful for both day-to-date operations and special events, with many emergency managers recommending that social media be part of the overall communications strategy in the event of a disaster.

The audience is already there. A concern regarding social media strategies for smaller municipalities is the notion that many of their residents do not use social media – the data, however, shows otherwise. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, it was noted that 83% of U.S. adults use YouTube, 68% use Facebook and 47% use Instagram. Even when you examine the 65+ years old demographic that is fast becoming the majority in rural municipalities, 60% of them use YouTube and 58% use Facebook.

Community building. A functioning social media page opens itself up to the public as a forum for conversations, ideas, and civic participation. It allows you to help residents get in touch with their elected officials and staff in an authentic, personal way that can be otherwise difficult to capture – not everyone is able to attend a town hall meeting, but many are able to watch a live-stream or recorded video on their time.

Best General Practices for Social Media

Have a clear strategy. When you are working on a social media platform, ask yourself the following questions to determine your approach:

- **Who are you trying to reach?**
  - Remember that each social media platform sees different usage among each demographic. If you are trying to reach teenagers for a youth volunteer program, you will want to use a different platform than one that you might use for a senior citizen population.
- **What are you trying to communicate?**
  - Are you letting the public know about an upcoming budget hearing? Asking for input on a parks and recreation initiative? Highlighting the work of a staff member? For all of these, the format and presentation will be highly dependent on which platforms you're using – an Instagram reel does not lend itself well to critical discussion while a Facebook post might not be the best place either for short-form content.
- **Who is responsible for managing the account?**
  - Some municipalities will have a dedicated person from each department to manage the social media accounts, while others will have one person for the entire organization. Some will choose a hybrid, where staff from each department can contribute to their department's social media account, but it must be approved by the overall management.

- o **What are your responsibilities for preserving and collecting public records?**
  - o For every municipality, there are guidelines and requirements on keeping and maintaining public records. Work to identify how your usage of social media falls within these parameters so that you can keep these on-hand if needed.

Conduct a social media audit. Take the time to research your existing social media pages, or if you don't have one, then create a benchmark from peer communities. Look at your current audience, what the performance metrics are, what the look and feel is of your social media pages and how they compare to others. Are you reaching the people you want to reach? And are you presenting the image that you want to share?

Set your pages up for success. Find a peer community that has a social media page you like, and work to bring yours up to the same standards. Fill out your page's bio, update the profile picture to your municipality's seal and use free video and photoshopping tools like Canva to create a banner for your pages.

Be consistent. The most common publishing cadence on social media is about 4 times per week. You should aim for this and pay attention to the best times for when these posts are made on each platform. For example, Facebook's best day and time for posting is on a Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., while its worst day is on Sunday.

How to Create Engaging Posts

An engaging social media post does the following:

- o **It gives value to the reader by providing them with information.**
  - o Ex. Using your municipality's social media page to highlight a service your community provides or updating residents about road closures.
- o **It provides a call to action for a civic item.**
  - o Ex. Requesting that the community fill out a survey or provide feedback on a new project.
- o **It evokes emotion in the reader.**
  - o Ex. Pictures of your first responders helping in the community, highlighting the natural beauty of your community or celebrating the completion of a project for your residents.
- o **It engages the audience by asking them to leave their own mark on it.**
  - o Ex. Bryston City, NC posts a picture of two Elk in the Oconaluftee River with the title, "CAPTION THIS!"
- o **It provides a way to get further information on the topic.**
  - o Ex. Provides links to relevant documents, websites or other resources.

Codes of Conduct

The Need for Codes of Conduct

Help mitigate legal issues. In one scenario, an elected official takes office and then proceeds to make a post on a controversial subject, which gets flooded with comments from the community and their fellow elected officials. In response, the original elected official deletes comments that they do not like... and accidentally violates the First Amendment in the process and destroys documentation for what is considered a public forum and public meeting.

There are several court cases that are relevant to social media usage for elected officials and municipal staff. A proper code of conduct helps everyone involved know what they can and cannot do on social media channels. It also helps staff understand the impact of their social media activity both personally and professionally. What might seem like a fun post can have far-reaching consequences that affect project timelines, support for the municipality and even your own employment.

Recommended Policies

Determine what is a public record. As we mentioned earlier, many items can constitute a public meeting or record. Three policies for social media that you can adopt to be compliant with public records laws are:

- **Posting all original content to the government's website.** You can use the social media site as a secondary outlet.
- **Link back to the official government website for additional information.** You can accomplish this with a quick hyperlink at the bottom of your social media posts.
- **Require employees who post public records to social media to ensure that the original document is retained in a manner that complies with public record policy.** For many municipalities, this will vary depending on whether physical or digital copies are required. A PDF saved to a storage archive or printing out a social media post and its comments will be dependent on your own requirements.

Have employee guidelines for using government and personal social media. This is the most critical component of social media policy, as improper use can result in bad information misleading the public, a violation of intellectual property rights, disclosure of confidential information, harassment and defamation. It's important to have two policies – one for government accounts and one for personal accounts. Misuse of personal social media accounts can create tension in the workplace, in addition to placing the organization in a precarious position. To avoid these items, consider adopting these policies.

- **Be honest and transparent.** When using official accounts, be honest about the topics discussed and ensure that you are being accurate. If you find that something needs to be corrected, do so quickly and note when and why you made the change.

- **Keep it professional and nonconfrontational.** Insist that social media channels do not get bogged down in arguments, that the language used is polite and nonconfrontational and that the responses are professional.
- **Prohibit certain content on official media pages.** Ensure that you have a clause stating that employees are prohibited from posting the following items on the governments' social media channels:
    o Information about actual or potential claims and litigations involving the government.
    o Intellectual property of others.
    o Photographs of employees or members of the public, without written permission.
    o Defamatory material.
    o Any personal, sensitive or confidential information about anyone.
    o Obscene, pornographic or other offensive/illegal materials or links.
    o Racist, sexist and other disparaging language about a group of people.
    o Sexual comments about, or directed to, anyone.
    o Political campaign materials or comments.
    o Threatening or harassing comments.
    o Other information that is not public in nature.
- **Provide guidelines for personal social media use.** With both professional and casual social media channels available for wide use, it can be difficult to keep a handle on employee usage of social media. Misuse can create tension in the workplace, in addition to placing the organization in a precarious position. Some helpful guidelines include:
    o Having a requirement that employees include in any post related to the government or their job on a personal/professional site a disclaimer that the posting reflects their own opinion, and not that of the government.
    o Referencing policies in your employee handbook that relate to conduct and ethics, privacy and confidentiality, harassment, retaliation and other relevant conducts.
    o Giving notice to the employees that they have no reasonable expectation of privacy when using government technology or when using social media.

Have elected officials social media usage guidelines. This can be more difficult to incorporate, as many elected officials do not necessarily feel beholden to supporting an organization or its mission and can be much more vocal as a result. However, it is important that elected officials understand the legal space they have to work with, so that they do not violate any laws or accidentally make the tasks of your municipality much harder.

- **Elected officials using the municipality's social media channels should be subjected to the same requirements as employees.** You can use your current codes of ethics for elected officials combined with the code for employees as a reference for social media standards. You can also encourage elected officials to use personal social media channels to express their own viewpoints.
- **Provide clear guidance on what is an open meeting law.** Many cases have been noted where a quorum of lawmakers held a discussion regarding public business on social media, completely unaware that this discussion constituted and was subject to the open meetings law for their municipality. This can happen on official government channels or the elected officials' own personal social media

channels. Be sure to provide elected officials with guidance on what constitutes an open meeting, what the legal requirements are for these situations and how best to handle them.

- **Consider adopting the following policies.**
  - A formal recognition that elected officials use of social media to discuss public business may violate the open meeting law.
  - A prohibition against elected officials using any social media to discuss public business.
  - A requirement that a social media site used by an elected official to communicate with constituents include a link back to the city's official website for detailed information.
  - A requirement that elected officials who use social media for campaigning establish separate social media for that purpose and not access that social media through government technology.

Challenges & Solutions

General Issues

The public comment question. Some municipalities will use their social media as a one-way communication tool to distribute information to the public. For these situations, comments are disabled by default on their social media pages. However, some municipalities view this as an opportunity to receive information and feedback from the public that might enhance operations and help build a sense of community. These benefits come with risks, such as:

Exposing the municipality to legal action if they fail to act on information. If a municipality has allowed comments to be made on their channels, and someone reports information that, if not acted upon, could result in harm to someone, this exposes the municipality to legal action if someone is harmed afterwards. This is considered to have provided the government with notice *and* a subsequent failure to act.

- **Social media posts are not private.** This is something that should be readily apparent to government workers, but it is not immediately understood by the public at large. Members of the public have reported instances of their comments being disclosed as public records under the state's open records law, which has resulted in backlash and reports of feeling "disturbed" that their comments were visible to the public.
- **Malicious and inappropriate content.** The anonymity that comes with cyberspace can sometimes result in bad actors posting inappropriate content on social media pages. Failing to monitor and remove these posts in a timely manner can have negative consequences and generate complaints from the public about exposure to the content.
- **The free speech aspect.** If a municipal government removes a comment from a member of the public, this can result in a violation of that person's free speech rights by excluding their viewpoint/opinions expressed.

To address these issues, you can consider adopting the following social media policies:

- **Create a public comment policy for posting on social media channels that:**
  - Identifies viewpoint neutral criteria that will be used to determine when a comment or link posted by a member of the public will be removed, which can include comments that are off-topic, obscene, pornographic, defamatory, harassing, commercial, criminal, political or that violate the intellectual property rights of others.
  - Reserves the right to remove posts that violate the policy.
  - Gives notice that the comments are monitored only during business hours, and thus information conveyed after hours will not be received until the next business day.
  - Gives notices that comments are subject to disclosure as public records.
- **Create procedures and responsibilities for monitoring public comments.** This should be done daily, during business hours, and have a clear stakeholder for who is responsible for removing or monitoring content. You should also have policies and guidelines on record that state how to report public issues that you are notified of via social media.

What To Do With Backlash?

Social media backlash and how to navigate it. The Massachusetts' Bay Transit Authority, in a social media post on X (formerly known as Twitter), created a social media post asking its audience to post "what they love about [the MBTA]. What followed was a series of posts highlighting broken facilities, lack of amenities and missed transit connections. This is not uncommon, as the MBTA has been featured as "one of the hardest jobs in Boston" as it receives several comments and posts from social media users. What can we learn from the MBTA and how it manages its social media?

- **Meet the vitriol with sympathy and help.** Many posts have been made, often with profanity, critiquing and attacking the MBTA for shortcomings. The best approach that staff reported was not to address the hostility, but instead validate the person's frustrations, inquire more about the situation so that they can provide help and maintain a professional, helpful tone in response. If you are dealing with hurtful comments on a municipality page, remember that these commenters are oftentimes venting their frustrations at an unknown entity, not you as a person.
- **Review the lessons from the interaction.** When dealing with the ensuing backlash from the MBTA's campaign, there were several takeaways and action items. One was to recognize the issues that users brought up and create action items to address them, while the other was to be careful in the future in asking for feedback in this manner. If you have a social media post that goes awry, take note of what went wrong.
- **Be transparent in your response.** There are many ways that social media posts can go awry – instead of trying to cover up mistakes or missteps, instead own up to the shortcomings and be transparent about them. This helps mitigate several issues: first, social media users are apt to screenshot your posts and hold it over your heads if they are deleted. Second, it helps reinforce that your organization is learning and can be held accountable if it makes mistakes.

How Centralina Can Help

Although Centralina does not offer technical assistance specifically for social media, we do have decades of experience with crafting successful public engagement strategies. Our team can help you understand and address public concerns, develop strong, supportable solutions and address the right issues.

In addition to developing a strategy for greater engagement, we can also assist local governments in choosing the best communication tools, developing unbiased questions, analyzing and summarizing inputs and reporting findings.

> *This document was created as part of Centralina Regional Council's Small Towns Thrive initiative.*
>
> *See www.centralina.org for additional resources to support our communities.*
>
> *For additional information, please reach out to Kelly Weston,*
> *Government Affairs and Member Engagement Administrator at kweston@centralina.org.*

Additional Resources

- **Trends & Best Practices**
  - Hootsuite. Social Trends 2024 in Government. Video & Video Slides. Report and Minisite.
  - UNC School of Government. Social Media Trends and Best Practices. Link.
  - Pew Research Center (2024). Social Media Fact Sheet. Link.
  - HootSuite. Social Media Strategy Template. Link.
- **Crisis Communications**
  - GovPilot. How to Make a Crisis Communications Plan: Tips for Municipal Emergency Management Planning. Link.
  - HootSuite. Creating a Crisis Management Plan. Link.
  - HootSuite. How to Manage a Crisis on Social Media (Before, During and After an Emergency). Link.
- **Policies**
  - National League of Cities' Risk Information Sharing Consortium. Building Local Government Social Media Policies. Link.
  - Municipal Research and Services Center (2023). Social Media Policy Questions for Local Governments to Answer. Link.
  - Institute for Local Government. Sample Social Media Policies. Link.
  - CivicPlus. Sample Social Media Policy Template. Link.
  - Florida League of Cities. Municipal Resources & Sample Policies. Link.
- **Brand Guide**
  - Indeed. How to Create a Social Media Style Guide in 4 Steps. Link.

- o   Sprout Social. How to Create a Social Media Style Guide: 10 Things to Include. Link.
- o   HootSuite. The Perfect Social Media Style Guide for Your Brand in 2024. Link.
- o   Canva. How to Create a Visual Brand Guide. Link.
- o   Colum Five. How to Create a Brand Style Guide in 5 Steps. Link.
- **Opinion**
  - o   Suciu, P. (2019). Social Media and Local Government. Forbes. Link.
  - o   Miller, A. (2024). The Role of Social Media in Local Government Engagement. Careers in Government. Link.
  - o   Nickodem, K. (2022). Can Local Government Officials Block Their Critics on Social Media? UNC School of Government. Link.
  - o   Sargent, H. (2015). The Hardest Job in Boston: Managing the MBTA Twitter Account. Boston.com. Link.