

City Council Ad Hoc Committee on Technology presents:

Strategies for effective communication in the new digital media landscape

Using digital platforms to reach constituents, engage community, and tell your stories.

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Digital communication technologies have changed the game.

Digital communication technologies have exploded across the world and have transformed nearly every aspect of the information and media landscape. Organizations are shifting to address implications, manage consequences, and capitalize on opportunities presented by new digital communications platforms, and by the emergence of social media platforms in particular.

Organizations that are responsive, transparent and willing engage in direct dialog with their constituents and customers on their chosen platforms are increasingly rewarded in this new landscape. Those that fail to adapt find it increasingly challenging to get their stories out, manage their brand, and develop goodwill amongst their constituents.

Civic organizations are especially impacted by this shifting landscape, which is both technological and social, and need to adapt their communications practices and outreach strategies alongside complementary IT policies.

The shift to digital communication has changed the way that people expect to find, share, and discuss information, and has opened whole new models for engagement and participation. People now expect to be able to receive and discover up-to-date information instantly online, and expect information to be live and fresh. People also expect to be able to share, rate and discuss content, as opposed to simply consuming it. Static websites with information that rarely changes are rapidly being replaced by dynamic blogging platforms where new and interesting content is added daily, and where social sharing and commenting is integral.

Public discourse is increasingly occurring online and in social networks, as opposed to in town-hall meetings and on op-ed pages. Organizations have to develop new skills, practices, and policies in order to effectively communicate, engage, and manage their brand in this new environment.

Because wireless internet, tablet computers, and smart phones have also become widespread, people now expect to be able to access and share information on a wide variety of computing devices. Effective communication strategies take this into account and choose content platforms that are widely supported on a variety of devices.

There is an overwhelming density and variety of information available online. Reaching an audience in this environment demands strategic and skillful use of digital communications and analytics tools, as well as basic investments in creating compelling stories and content.

Although the communication technology landscape can seem complex & overwhelming, the majority of people are gathering into only a handful of dominant online networks. These are the new pillars of media, and as organizations are adapting to this new landscape, they are establishing an agreed-upon set of standards, workflows, and best practices.

Key Recommendations

- » Invest in both staff time and capacity in effective engagement via digital communication platforms
- » Establish clear internal guidelines & engagement policies. Review & revise quarterly.
- » Empower staff to communicate often, enthusiastically and transparently.
- » Establish clear goals and gather relevant metrics to tune the effectiveness of any communication strategy
- » Prioritize the use of digital communication platforms to engage, educate, and gain insights from your community
- » Allow for creativity and experimentation as new platforms emerge and technologies evolve

Analysis: Why invest in digital communication now?

The most direct way to engage communities is by going to where they are gathered. Until very recently this has meant communicating through local papers, public TV, phone, and by personally inviting members to civic events such as town-hall meetings. But now the masses have largely moved online, and are gathering into a handful of dominant social networks and digital platforms.

Platforms like Facebook, RSS, e-mail newsletters, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, Google Plus, and Foursquare make it very easy for people to register, connect, share, collaborate, and create with unprecedented power & reach. These platforms have built the new tools for engagement, posing both challenges & incredible opportunities for civic organizations. These empower the city to establish direct conduits to its constituencies, bypassing traditional 3rd-party media outlets, just as they empower community members to speak more loudly and to many more people at once.

According to a Comscore report from June 2011, social media activity accounts for 1 out of every 6 minutes spent online. Facebook has over 600 million regular users with over 300 million unique visitors every day. It is the most visited website in the world reaching 50% of web users globally. Twitter counts over 175 million users sharing over 1 billion tweets per week. LinkedIn has over 100 million users with 50% in North America. Among Fortune 500 companies, 71% have Facebook pages, 59% have corporate accounts on Twitter, and 56% said social media is very important to their business & marketing strategy.

As of July 2011, 14.7% of websites on the Internet were blogs built on the Wordpress platform, and 22% of all new websites that come online are Wordpress blogs. This is significant because it demonstrates that the earlier model of one-way communication via static websites is giving way to new models of digital communication and presentation that invite discussion and dialog.

Like all modern organizations, cities must now build capacity around digital communication and specifically around social media engagement, community management, marketing, brand management, content creation, and storytelling. In effect, the city is expected to socialize more directly with the community, to do so in ways that are engaging, compelling, authentic, and strategic.

Analysis: How can digital communication help cities?

Communication & engagement through social networks benefits the city in many ways. Reliance upon traditional 3rd-party media outlets to evenly communicate the achievements and initiatives of the city is significantly reduced as local newspaper and television journalism has declined, and as information consumption has fragmented and moved online.

There are great benefits available for civic organizations that embrace the new digital communication platforms. Operational friction between departments can be reduced when departments can see the others' status updates. Community stakeholders such as business leaders, non-profits, community organizers, and local resource managers can all gain greater visibility into city efforts, leading to more opportunities for coordination & collaboration. There are so many great folks in Santa Cruz that don't even know about the person next door who might be critical to their own endeavors. A civic-led approach to social media can help reveal the inherent potential of our community.

As more community members are connected to city social accounts, messaging & notifications have a broader & more immediate reach. For example, notifications of upcoming street work projects can be targeted to individuals and businesses in impacted neighborhoods. Likewise, citizens can be enabled to participate in reporting issues, engaging on important topics, and contributing expertise and support where the City may lack it.

Digital communication platforms allow the city to listen, analyze, and gather insights on local sentiment, problems, crime, and inefficiencies. Likewise, the city can tell its stories directly to its constituency and can motivate citizens towards events, actions, and common goals.

Overview: Understanding the Key Tools & Platforms

The digital communication environment can seem complex but there are really only a few key platforms that need to be addressed.

First, there are the main **social network platforms**, then there are the **content publishing platforms**, and finally, the **analytics tools** for digging more deeply into the massive amounts of data generated by digital communications.

Social Network Platforms

- » **Facebook:** primarily a social platform.
 - <http://www.copyblogger.com/ultimate-facebook/>
 - <http://mashable.com/guidebook/facebook/>

- » **Twitter:** primarily a links & news sharing platform.
 - <http://mashable.com/guidebook/twitter/>

- » **Google Plus:** young, but leveraging Google's extensive reach. Will probably emerge as a strong contender and should be watched and experimented with.
 - <http://mashable.com/2011/07/16/google-plus-guide/>

- » **LinkedIn:** a professional social networking platform. Useful for engaging businesses, recruiting talent, and accessing local networks of professionals.
 - <http://learn.linkedin.com/nonprofits/>

Content Publishing Platforms

- » **YouTube:** for video publishing, sharing, rating, & commenting.
 - <http://www.youtube.com/government101>

- » **Wordpress:** for creating blog-based websites, publishing articles and news.
 - <http://wordpress.org/about/>

- » **Email Lists & Newsletters:** While not a new concept for most, email remains a powerful tool for distribution of targeted information. It is important to differentiate use of email in this way from email as a direct messaging tool.

Note: Email can be used very effectively without spamming the community. If the content being emailed is valuable and relevant, and people have an opportunity to opt-out, then email communication will be appreciated and is far more effective than printed newsletters.

What these tools are NOT For:

- » Internal departmental conversation & knowledge sharing
- » Internal debate or conflict resolution

There are excellent social-media "style" platforms that have been built explicitly to handle the private, internal needs of an organization, such as Yammer & Salesforce Chatter. Don't make the mistake of using your public facing communication channels for internal conversation.

Analytics Tools

One of the benefits of the Digital Communications landscape is that it is broadly instrumented to deliver analytics. There are many analytics tools available, both for free and for fee - but the most important investment is in setting clear goals up front, so you know what to analyze.

Popular free, off-the-shelf tools for aggregating social media accounts and doing basic analytics include:

- » Seesmic
- » Hootsuite

More comprehensive enterprise-scale tools are available, for a price, including:

- » Salesforce
- » PageLever
- » SocialCast
- » Jive
- » Offerings from **SAP, IBM, Oracle**

Overview: Tricks of the Trade

Experts in digital communication and social media strategy leverage these approaches to get the best results from their toolkit of communication platforms:

- » **Friend & Follow.** Use social search tools to find people in the community, regional experts, affinity groups, etc. “Friend” them on Facebook & “Follow” them on Twitter. Invite them to join the SC City group on LinkedIn. “Like” their relevant Facebook posts and “retweet” relevant Twitter updates. This builds good will and brings more attention to the SC City social accounts.
- » **Tweeting.** Use Twitter to push links, ask questions, and drive visitors to Facebook, YouTube & city web properties.
- » **Facebook:** Use Facebook to directly engage the community in surveys & contests. Post fun & interesting pictures, & feature interviews. The reason you have a Facebook page is that every time you post on it, you appear in your followers personal news feeds.
- » **Blogs as social aggregators:** Set up blogs (Wordpress) for long-form content that automatically pushes links to social networks, uses Facebook Connect to gather comments, tracks discussion & links track-backs. Always reply to comments, unless they are abusive.
- » **Participate:** Contribute to relevant online news & discussions. For example, use the SC City Twitter account to add a comment to a Fast Company article about Next Space. This brings exposure to the SC City Twitter account and can help gather new followers.
- » **Draft on daily trends & issues:** Engage the community around these interest points. Be a source of valuable news and information about the community or about news that impacts the community. Damage control: establish core guidelines for handling negative feedback, abuse, and runaway narratives. Stick to these guidelines but review them quarterly for effectiveness.
- » **Listen & pay attention:** monitor for name and mentions, analyze for sentiment, and understand the difference between average users & key influencers.
- » **Embrace mobile & location:** social engagement is quickly moving away from desktop screens and into mobile devices. Learn how to take advantage of the ability for mobile devices to tie content to the physical locale of your community.
- » **Embrace Metrics:** analytics tools are your friend. Now you can tell whether or not your messages are being shared, liked, and engaged with, and can tune your strategy accordingly. You can also know

where your site visitors are coming from, what they search on to locate you, and what they miss that you might have expected them to find.

- » **Be a person.** Establish the identity of each public-facing City of Santa Cruz department as a social media “person”. Be active. Be engaging. Go to all the online parties, smile, and say “hello”.

Analysis: Building organizational capacity and priorities around this new landscape.

Effective use of digital communication platforms will require organizational alignment, shared goals & guidelines, and allocation of resources in order to appropriately staff support roles & build capacity.

Key Recommendations

- » Identify a Chief Communications Officer to maintain the overall communications and content development strategy and practice.
- » For each department, dedicate a staff-level Community Manager. These roles should be a dotted line to the Chief Communications Officer.
- » Empower and train individuals across organizations to engage in direct communication on behalf of their departments.
- » Review and refine practices and guidelines regularly, both within communications staff and across related departments, such as IT and Legal.
- » Have some patience - it takes time to build a successful online presence

Sample Guidelines For Community Managers, or other personnel communicating on behalf of the City.

City department heads should collaborate to develop a core set of internal guidelines & metrics in-line with strategic goals, operational processes, stakeholder requirements, and legal constraints. Most importantly, define a clear set of guidelines for how to handle negative feedback, abusive comments, and fast-moving PR disasters.

Here are a sample set of commonly-accepted guidelines to use as a starting place:

Engage your Audience with Valuable Posts

Post fresh and timely content in a similar voice and subject that promotes dialogue with your audience

Participate at Your Level of Expertise

Stick to topics that you can provide thoughtful leadership or input on. If you are contributing to a topic outside of your expertise make this clear to readers. Also, don't hesitate to use your internal network for a suggested response. If you receive media or legal inquiries, seek assistance. If in doubt, ask.

Be Transparent and Authentic

Be open and honest about your City affiliation and the topic that you are creating content about to keep the experience authentic. Use a legal disclaimer for blogs. Do not ever impersonate another person or use a false name (usernames are fine as long as you disclose your identity elsewhere). Use a humanized voice in a first-person, conversational style while following the audience's language and tone.

Play by the Rules

Abide by the guidelines of the host website. In addition to the terms of service, each social networking site has certain customs and conventions. Learn what is appropriate and follow the example of influencers in the community.

Create Content Appropriate for All but Tailored to the Target Audience

Make sure the content is appropriate for all audiences around the world before posting, while also tailoring the conversation to your target audience. Some audience members may not speak native English, so simple sentences help. The definition of "appropriate" differs widely among people, so post as if everyone you know (and everyone you don't) reads every word.

Keep Content Relevant for a Variety of Contexts

Content contributed to social media sites is public and often cannot be edited or deleted later. Even if you can delete it later, copies may propagate through reposting, and links to your original post may show cached information. Include key information so it makes sense if reposted out of context.

Link Strategically

Links can be a valuable part of your post, especially for venues with mobile implications or character limits like Twitter. Make sure the destination is relevant and accessible to everyone.

Don't Delete Negative Feedback

Don't remove or alter feedback just because it is negative. Deleting negative comments or feedback creates the appearance that you are censoring/hiding something and discourages open, authentic dialogue. Instead, post compelling responses to criticism and consider them as opportunities for growth.

Filter for Obscene or Inappropriate Comments

Obscene or inappropriate comments should be removed as quickly as possible. This includes content that is offensive, denigrating, or completely out of context. For borderline comments (in context but using profanity, for example), remove the comment and send the commenter a private message with the reason. The commenter then has the opportunity to repost within the guidelines.

Be the First to Correct Mistakes

If you make a mistake, admit it and make a quick and upfront correction. You are setting an example as a community leader and what you write is ultimately your responsibility.

Comply with all City Policies & Legal Requirements

Avoid commenting on any rumors—do not deny or affirm them. Do not post material that may infringe the copyrights, trademarks, or other intellectual property of others, or post material that encourages others to do so. Among other things, you should not post any of the following without proper consent:

- Images or photograph
- Videos or Music Recordings
- Drawings
- Presentations
- Copy written work of any kind.

Respect City Policies, Programs and Peers

Don't pass blame to another department for unpopular policies or program issues. Your goal is community satisfaction but should never be at the cost of sacrificing the reputation of another group.

Respect the Community, other institutions, and other Government organizations.

Santa Cruz is embedded in a larger context of public and private organizations at multiple levels, so saying anything negative about others will be perceived as bullying. Such negativity exposes the City to defamation and libel claims. When you wish to challenge or comment upon the decisions, policies or positions of people, groups, or institutions, it must be done with utmost clarity and deference. Refer to a specific and public reference, and then offer the community the opportunity to discuss. Ask for opinion. Engage in conversation. Offer the other group the opportunity to comment, as well. Above all, be factual, never make unsubstantiated claims, and keep a respectful tone.

Resources & References

- » <http://www.howto.gov/>
- » <http://blogs.journalism.co.uk/editors/2011/06/16/comscore-social-media-accounts-for-one-out-of-every-six-minutes-spent-online-in-us/>
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