

DO you tweet?

The days of the traditional news media being the primary source of getting your message out are over. Now, cities and towns must respond to situations in minutes, not hours. New ways of communicating using social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook are an easy way to be responsive.

Twitter is the simplest form of new communication tools: 140-character blog posts designed to be short, easy to understand and quickly updated. It gives local leaders instant access to employees, partners, citizens, the media and other stakeholders. Because up-to-the-minute coverage online has replaced the 24-hour news cycle, it is important for municipalities to share information at a rate that is equal to unofficial sources in times of crisis.

Although uses for this new type of communication are still being explored, cities and towns have already started using Twitter to keep their citizens informed. It is being used to provide information on public meetings, safety or evacuation updates, and recreation department information. The City of North Myrtle Beach received widespread praise from the media and residents alike for its use of Twitter during the spring wildfires.

“We are still experimenting with what information is reaching people on social sites like Facebook and Twitter, but with the recent wildfires in North Myrtle Beach, those sites were invaluable for getting quick information to residents, visitors and just curious bystanders,” explained Nicole Aiello, public information officer for North Myrtle Beach. “There was a flood of new followers and fans on both sites the day of the wildfires and, within a short window of time, I was able to give quick, up-to-the-minute updates on everything from times evacuees were being permitted back to their residences to places to find or drop off donations for fire victims.”

Local law enforcement agencies use Twitter to post Amber Alerts, crime and fire alerts, traffic updates and relevant information on crime trends. In the event of an emergency, Twitter is a useful tool to direct the flow of public movement and instruct citizens on proper responses and procedures.

Twitter can also be an important means of eliciting public participation in local government. Municipal Twitter accounts can be used to link to council meeting agendas or minutes, community events and news releases. Some municipalities are even streaming their meetings live on UStream and posting them to Web video outlets like YouTube or Vimeo.

Recreation departments are using Twitter to update people on the status of game cancellations and results. The quick communication offered by Twitter and the fact that updates can be sent and received via mobile phone and PDA make it easy to communicate with residents.

Facebook provides a slightly different form of communication than Twitter. Facebook pages are not as useful for immediate information, but they can provide an alternative home for municipal information while creating a relationship with citizens that goes beyond normal Web site/reader interaction.

While keeping communication fast and up to date is important, municipalities must take steps to ensure the information is accurate. The city's Facebook contact must be careful of whom the city is "friending" (or "following" on Twitter) and pay attention to the content posted on municipal pages. The city should develop a set of formal operating procedures detailing who has the ability to post on its page, what they are allowed to post and the review process that must take place before content goes up. It is important to keep in mind that these social media tools should be used as part of a strategic and targeted communications plan. Just as a city would not put out a newsletter without first knowing the target audience and the goals the publication is trying to achieve, the same is true of social media tools. If used properly, these new media tools present an outlet for direct communication between local governments and the communities they serve unlike any before. They are inexpensive, effective, simple and useful.

"I can definitely see the advantages of using Facebook and Twitter and will continue to use them," said Aiello.