

Social Media- The Newest Face on Public Relations

“Social Media” is a phrase coined to encompass all of the software applications people use to stay in touch with each other electronically – primarily using cell phones or the Internet. As the world becomes more mobile, social media is used to maintain a sense of community. We can carry immediate access to our friends, family, bowling league teams and, for some, even business contacts, in our pocket as we head out to conquer the world. Proponents cheer that we can now use all the wasted downtime we all have – waiting in line, riding an elevator, sitting at a red light – to catch up on our personal networks. For some, this level of connectedness is long overdue. Others will be left grumbling about how kids these days can’t even survive an elevator ride without whipping out a cell phone. This type of media is designed to help people blend the things they love into the activities they must do. It’s great for short quick bursts of information or to link others to other sources of info. It’s also designed for informal communication – when 140 characters limitations per Twitter message, or “tweet” as they’re called, it is necessary to cut some corners. At first blush, social media can seem unnecessary for city operations. After all, city government focuses on real-world infrastructure and critical city services, right? How will Twitter or Facebook - two of the most popular social media applications - help the city plow streets or pick up the trash? Simply stated, social media can extend your city’s standard communication efforts, not replace it. Social media networks most likely operate as opt-in services that require cell or Internet service, which could exclude a significant part of your citizenry. But in certain situations, social media will work nicely with a minimal amount of effort. Assuming the city already has Internet access, most social media sites are free. If the city wants to delve into social media, basic public relations tenets apply –tweaked slightly to apply to social media.

Know your demographics and your message:

The general perception is that social media sites are used exclusively by the under-18 crowd. That may have been true early on, but research is showing a steady maturing of social media audiences. In fact, the usage statistics between the sites vary greatly depending on the main activity of the site. According to research conducted by Forrester Research, older audiences are likely to “consume” a site – visit regularly, read posts but not interact. The more interactive or creative the purpose of the site is, the younger the audience tends to be. For an “add-on” communication method like social media, it may be easier for the city to start on a smaller scale. It’s very likely that the city has a built-in real-life audience already using social media – sports leagues, library groups – that would appreciate updates pertaining to their interests.

Keep to the point:

It is crucial that the information be usable. Keep the message brief and pertinent to the audience. Perhaps the library could Twitter about the new books added to the collection this month. A Facebook status update that a ball game has been rained out might actually travel faster and with less effort than the standard calling tree. If your city is home to a large number of cell-phone-carrying co-eds, a timely message regarding snow ordinances before the snow plows roll might save everyone the headache of towed cars.

Be responsive, not reactive:

The speed at which any electronic messages travel is why political candidates strive to leverage social media. A single, low-cost message on a few social media sites can generate just as much fervor as a national television commercial. In fact, spreading your message through the electronic “word-of-mouth” is called viral marketing. Like any virus, a social media conversation can mutate very quickly. An announcement about a delayed trash pick-up due to a holiday observance can quickly spark a conversation about the garbage truck knocking over a mailbox and stream of messages berating the number of holidays city employees get. The dead mailbox conversation probably deserves some follow-up – though take it offline fairly quickly. The holiday discussion is probably better left alone – chalk it up as freedom of expression. These depersonalized conversations lose the sense of personal responsibility and can get ugly and unmanageable very quickly.

Leverage your contacts:

It can be extremely labor-intensive to create a social media presence. An entire industry has developed around this type of activity. Instead, consider “lurking” on a few social media sites –join but stop short of participating in the conversations - to get a feel for who is already using social media in your community. Odds are that your local media professionals are already networked. Once you know who is connected, start a conversation with them

personally. Get them subscribed to your Web site updates or email lists. Play your cards right, and they could very well be the newest tool in your public relations tool belt. At the end of the day, content is key. The best way to get “play” on social media Web sites is also the best way to air time from traditional media outlets – give them something good to discuss. Need further evidence of the potential power of social media? Consider the impact of social media on the Iranian election. (<http://mashable.com/2009/06/14/newmedia-iran/>). There’s a case where social media is empowering the disenfranchised – and then, real-life audience – and the rest of the world gets a front row seat.