Best Practices for Social Media in Municipal Government

By Linda Rooney, President, DandeLions Digital

For municipal governments, creating a social media strategy can be scary, but it doesn't have to be.

Social media can be a vital communication tool, and if used strategically, can curb conjecture and rumors that may arise when residents lack a clear picture of how their local government is working for the community. Using social media to communicate with residents should be part of any local government's communications plan.

According to the article "The State of Social Media in Government – 2019"[i] by Hootsuite, a social media management tool, government organizations that use social media can build trust, are more agile during a crisis, and are better equipped to respond to false rumors in real time. Also, social media can help government agencies "own the narrative" before a crisis starts by delivering information about service changes or other hot-button issues that residents want to know about.

Establishing Social Media Guidelines

It is important to establish clear and transparent social media guidelines and to include them on the borough's website.

According to the Government Social Media Organization,[ii] there are 10 "must-haves" for an effective social media policy.

1. **Define the scope** – What official social media sites are included and who does the policy apply to (municipal employees, contractors or vendors, elected officials)?

2. **Establish social media authority and administration** – Who has the authority to enforce the policy, who administers the accounts, and what is the approval process for posting?

3. **Use of personal social media** – Establish guidelines on how employees should identify themselves on social media and how or if they can use social media on government time. Then offer training for appropriate social media use once the guidelines are established.

4. **Use of social media within the borough** – Define the acceptable use of social media, whether it is through official or personal accounts.

5. **Content standards** – Ensure all content, whether coming from a municipal or personal account, is authentic and transparent.

6. **Social media identification** – Ensure the borough account is easily recognizable, since these accounts are an extension of the municipality's "brand." The public must be able to quickly and accurately identify official social media accounts.

7. **Moderating and post removal policy** – Create a policy that clearly states what types of posts and comments are subject to removal,

such as vulgarity, nudity, advertisements, threats, and unrelated content.

8. **Retention process** – Establish a process to ensure state records retention laws and policies for social media use are adhered to.

9. **What *not* to post** – Make it abundantly clear what types of conduct and content are not allowed on social media, whether on borough or personal accounts. For example, the municipality might want to include community group event posts as long as they are not politically or religiously affiliated.

10. **Violation consequences** – Establish clear consequences for any failure to meet the social media guidelines. Consequences should be transparent so employees understand the ramifications of violating any policy.

Establishing Social Media Accounts

The most useful and popular social media for a borough to set up are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. It is fairly easy to set up business-style accounts on Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn, but Facebook is trickier.

Here are tips to correctly establish a Facebook page:

- All of Facebook's business pages must be connected to a personal Facebook account. This means someone from the borough must set up or have a personal Facebook account. However, be sure to use an email address that will work in perpetuity for the organization, such as hello@myborough.com or info@myborough.com.

- Some municipalities like to set up several Facebook and Twitter pages for separate

things like government news, recreation department news, committee/commission news, etc.

- Take care with Facebook page settings:

  ◆ Disable posts by other people on the page so the borough is the only one who can post. This will still allow residents to comment.

  ◆ Allow post sharing to increase engagement.

  ◆ Enable notifications for comments and messages, then monitor comments and hide or delete anything that violates the posted social media policy (e.g., profanity). Notifications will also help the administrator of the page to respond to comments as necessary.

  ◆ Set the profanity filter to "strong."

- Once the social media accounts are established, the appropriate links and logos should be added to the borough's website, emails, and literature.

Planning a Social Media Schedule

An effective and efficient social media plan doesn't need to be a burden for an already-busy municipal staff. With the right planning and software, posting to platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn can be quick as well as organized.

Boroughs should plan their social media posting schedule around activities and events that happen seasonally. For example, in April, the country celebrated the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. This would have been an opportunity to post something about what the borough did. Or does the municipality have an Environmental Advisory Committee or Commission that could be highlighted in conjunction with Earth Day as a way to communicate what the committee or commission does?

The nuts and bolts of planning include:

a. Drafting a "seasonal" spreadsheet to track upcoming national, state, and local events. This will allow the administrator to post about it in a timely way.

b. Using material from the borough newsletter could give the administrator material for two to three posts per week for at least a month.

c. Finding and using a social media posting software calendar.

Using software that schedules posts, posts to several social media sites at once, and analyzes engagement will make social media posting more effective and less stressful.

Hootsuite, for example, is one such scheduling tool that allows users to schedule posts to several social media channels at once.

In addition to the software's posting capabilities, Hootsuite

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Recommendations from the social media scheduling tool Hootsuite's "The State of Social Media in Government"[iii] include:

1. **Invest in video and visual content** – Facebook and Instagram "stories" are the most popular form of visual content.

2. **Smart targeting and reporting can make the most out of an advertising budget** – Organic reach continues to decline on social media, but boosting the most engaging content can be a cost-effective way to reach the right audience.

3. **Create a social media plan for the unexpected** – Crisis communications plans must include social media to reach the maximum number of residents.

4. **Adhere to privacy laws to maintain and build trust** – Understand and respond to critical comments on social media, but do no block commenters unless they violate the borough's social media policies. The administrator and officials must keep "freedom of information" laws in mind, too.

5. **Set benchmarks to measure social media's impact** – Connect social media goals to organizational objectives.

What to post?

- Budget information,
- Recreational events,
- Government announcements or changes,
- Public works information, such as recycling reminders,
- New employee introductions,
- Meet Your Borough Council/Public Works/etc. articles, and
- County, state, and federal government notices.

lists comments and shares so the person overseeing the social media can see how posts are performing and respond to any comments or messages. Hootsuite has some great tools for analytics and social listening, as well.

This software averages around $29 per month for up to 10 social media channels. To test the applicability, the borough can sign up for a free trial first. For more information, visit hootsuite.com.

Digital communication became even more vital in the last few months, due to the coronavirus, pointing to the need for a good digital communication plan for local government that is comprehensive, timely, factual, and efficient. With a good plan and the right software tools, social media is an effective form of communication that enlightens and informs residents.

*About the author: Linda Rooney is the founder and CEO of DandeLions Digital, a company that provides comprehensive digital marketing services that center on brand and messaging. To learn more, visit dandelionsdigital.com. * Ⓑ

[i] *The New York Times*, March 3, 2020, "Fed Makes Emergency Rate Cut, but Markets Continue Tumbling."

[ii] The State of Social Media in Government, 2019. https://hootsuite.com/resources/the-state-of-social-media-in-government-in-2019.

[iii] The State of Social Media in Government, 2019. https://hootsuite.com/resources/the-state-of-social-media-in-government-in-2019.