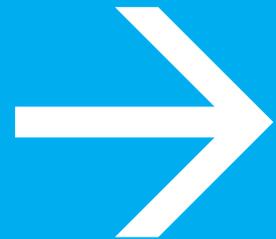


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## The case for local governments to establish a social media presence

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Local governments across Pennsylvania have made significant investments over the past decade in building websites and experimenting in what types of content they should contain. For the most part, these “web portals” serve as a one-stop shop for the public to access information and services. The challenge has always been that once they are built, how do you get your citizens and businesses to take full advantage of what you are providing? How do you drive traffic back to your site so that the public is benefiting from the content you are posting? You most likely are providing the website address or URL in your newsletters and other communications you are sending to the public, but how often is the public going to the site?

## THE CHALLENGE

The challenge for governments (as well as businesses) has been how to increase traffic on your website so that you can see what the return on the investment has been. This challenge has never been easily solved, because this technology forced each citizen to monitor the site for new information as it was posted. Only the most concerned citizen would do this. For the most part, the public forgets that the site exists, and consequently, derives little value from it.

## A SOLUTION

With the advent of new tools like [RSS feeds](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), and [Flickr](#), to name a few, the one-way flow of communication from websites has now evolved into a two-way conversation. These tools have made the internet more social, allowing communities with shared interests—be they families, friends, neighborhoods, brands, or local communities—the opportunity to converse with one another in real time by just hitting the enter key. Today, when you post new information on your website, you can use social media to broadcast it out to everyone who wishes to pay attention to you, whatever information you are making available. No longer does the public have to come to you for information, the information finds them.

If you see the value of your township having a website, you believe that you are providing valuable information on it, and you also believe the public would benefit from seeing it, then establishing a social media presence—as part of your overall communications strategy—is worth investigating.

## THE CASE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

The first step in determining a social media strategy is figuring out whether the people you want to reach are using social media. According to [The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project](#), 79% of American adults said they used the internet and nearly half of adults (47%), or 59% of internet users, say they use at least one of the social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace and Twitter. This corresponds to a [recent analysis](#) done that pointed out that almost one in two Americans have a Facebook account. With somewhere around half of your constituents logging into social networking sites—and 25% of them logging in daily on Facebook—there is an opportunity to better connect your audience to your digital content. According to the Pew Research Center, **Facebook users are much more politically engaged than most people.**

Our survey was conducted over the November 2010 elections. At that time, 10% of Americans reported that they had attended a political rally, 23% reported that they had tried to convince someone to vote for a specific candidate, and 66% reported that they had or intended to vote. Internet users in general were over twice as likely to attend a political meeting, 78% more likely to try and influence someone's vote, and 53% more likely to have voted or intended to vote. Compared with other internet users, and users of other SNS platforms, a Facebook user who uses the site multiple times per day was an additional two and half times more likely to attend a political rally or meeting, 57% more likely to persuade someone on their vote, and an additional 43% more likely to have said they would vote.

Once you have determined that your audience is there, your next step is to determine what valuable information you can provide them that will result in them wanting to “follow” and “like” your content, and perhaps most importantly, share your content with others.



## IDENTIFYING VALUABLE CONTENT

If you have a web site, and are tracking how many people visit your site and what pages they visit, you have a head start on knowing what your citizens view as valuable. In addition, since your audience is comprised, in part, of your friends and neighbors, you could simply ask them what they think would be valuable. The more valuable the content is, the more likely you will build an audience of citizens who will like and follow your social media sites. Among those things to consider:

- Meeting notices
- Township construction projects
- Road closures
- Change in garbage and recycling pick-up schedules
- Availability of community resources
- Snow removal schedules
- Emergency notifications

Obviously what your community will view as valuable will be dependent upon each individual local government. But identifying and distributing that content will determine how successful your social media strategy will be.

## ENGAGING WITH YOUR CONSTITUENTS

Social networking sites provide a way to engage with the public exponentially. By using social networks, you only need to answer the question once because you are providing that answer to everyone who is part of your community's social media presence. By adding new channels to communicate your message, more people will hear it, and they will hear it in real-time.

In addition, since there are fewer local news media outlets, and those outlets prefer to communicate negative or sensational content, social networks provide local governments with a way to communicate their message directly and can tell the whole story without the editorial constraints of local media. By engaging the public directly, you will have a better handle on what they are thinking and how they are responding to your performance.

The public will form and voice its opinions about their local government regardless of whether the local government establishes a website or social media presence. In fact, it is likely that many of them will use it to voice an opinion, and—depending upon the gravity of the issue—might establish their own site to voice their opinions. By establishing a social media presence, you can listen to these conversations and—when appropriate—engage in them.

## SOCIAL MEDIA DOES NOT STAND ON ITS OWN

If you want to successfully communicate with your constituents, social networks are just one part of your overall communications strategy. As pointed out earlier, though half of your constituents might be on Facebook, half are not, and upwards of 21% may not even be on the internet. When calculating how you will reach as many of your citizens as possible, the larger the number of communications channels available to you, the broader the audience you will reach. In a time when budgets are constrained, and local governments are searching for ways to reduce costs, social networks might prove to be a low cost strategy to keep the public informed when printing and postal rates continue to climb. By viewing social media as part of your overall communications strategy, you may be able to reduce costs while at the same time increasing the amount of information you are providing to the public.