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# Bringing Social Media Strategy into the 21st Century

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The third pillar of the *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* calls out technology and social media as means to "give police departments an opportunity to fully engage and educate communities in a dialogue about their expectations for transparency, accountability, and privacy."<sup>1</sup> The rapid mass adoption of smartphones around the globe has changed the way people interact with each other, how they get their news, and how the public interacts with law enforcement. Many police departments, in turn, have responded in the last few years by creating an online presence on a variety of popular digital platforms. If used effectively, social media can be a tremendous tool not only to engage with communities, but to serve as a crucial messaging tool during crises. The problem, however, is efficacy.

IACP's 2015 Social Media Survey revealed that 96.4 percent of responding agencies used social media in some capacity. However, in that same survey, 88.7 percent of the respondents indicated that the most common use of social media was for criminal investigations. How departments use their social media platforms matter.<sup>2</sup> Simply having a presence on social media

does not equate to effective engagement with the community. It is no different than having a uniformed officer standing on the street corner who only gives directions but doesn't talk or engage with the community. For that officer to make an impact, he or she needs to be personable and professional and build a connection with the community. The same can be said of departments' social media accounts. To fully engage and educate communities about transparency, accountability, and privacy (as the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing report recommends), social media cannot be seen as a simple tool for investigations or a digital bullhorn to announce community outreach programs. Rather, its importance needs to be driven from the top down, and it needs to have support from the bottom up. Practically speaking, this requires an organizational mind-set where the police chief and command staff are committed to using digital platforms as a means to converse with communities. Likewise, line-level staff needs to understand and support departmental efforts to create stories and content that will resonate with the community and help demystify the difficult job the officers do.

## Self-Assessment of Social Strategy

Police departments that use social media fall into two camps—those that engage in two-way conversations on social media and those that use it only as a one-way push of information. The first approach promotes organic engagement, transparency, and trust-building with the community; the second alienates residents and does nothing to build community ties. Imagine how frustrating it is for a resident to comment on a page or ask a question, only to have it ignored. A quick scan of a successful departmental Facebook page will show a multitude of interactions and comments on posts from the community, as well as the department writing back with a professional and human voice and tone. This holds true for both good *and* bad news. A lackluster social media presence is easy to spot as well. Unsuccessful social media posts have few to no "likes," interactions, or comments, and there's almost no participation from the department. Police chiefs would be wise to take a look at their own department's social media accounts to determine into which camp their department falls—because the public already knows. Having an account on

every major social media platform does not equate to being effective in building trust and engagement with the community.

Why is this important? One has to realize that the standard of customer service expected by the community is set by their own interactions with the private sector online. In the digital economy, people prefer to interact with their favorite (or least favorite) brands through their mobile phones or tablets. The private sector knows this and has gone to great strides in recent years to optimize a customer's experience to include the most information possible in the fewest number of "clicks."

### Case Study: Southwest Airlines Social Command Center

The author was once trying to fly from San Diego to San Jose, California, on Southwest Airlines, but, after three flight cancellations, things were looking grim. The line to speak with the gate agent stretched down the terminal, and, judging from the looks of the people being helped, none of them were getting the resolutions (or answers) they wanted. As an experiment, the author decided to tweet at Southwest Airlines to ask them about the delay and any possible resolution. Within 10 minutes, he got a response back from the airline's social command center asking for his flight information. After providing it, the

airline responded with another answer and an explanation, estimated time for the next flight take off, and a travel credit voucher for being inconvenienced.

Southwest Airlines' social command center is tasked with providing support whenever Southwest is flying and answering customer online queries within 15 minutes. In addition to listening and responding, the social business team proactively develops engaging content to generate conversation.<sup>3</sup>

Granted, very few law enforcement agencies have the resources and personnel to staff a "listening center," but there are a few key takeaways from which everyone can learn. In the Southwest Airlines example, the listening center staff are empowered to solve problems, not just to listen to them. Imagine a customer's experience if Southwest Airlines "listened" to a complaint online, but then referred the customer to a website to fill out a form to make a complaint or to file a claim for a travel voucher. That type of approach takes a negative experience (e.g., a flight delay) and then makes it worse by forcing the customer to jump through more hoops, instead of providing a resolution to the initial complaint. This is often the experience of residents trying to seek resolution from police departments online. More often than not, the residents are referred to a city website or online

reporting form. At times, this may be the only option. However, many queries that police departments get on social platforms can be answered and addressed—if there is someone listening. To be effective, social media managers for police departments need to possess the authority to resolve issues and the tools to solve problems.

Government, on the whole, still lags behind in this regard, often serving up shrunken versions of department webpages or outdated information, which is buried three to four page "clicks" deep.

### Staffing

There are many challenges to maintaining an effective digital online presence. Platforms are constantly changing and understanding which platforms reach which segments of the community can be a daunting, ever-changing task. In addition, having the proper department voice and tone can mean the difference between building trust and creating distance. Therefore, a full-time or dedicated social media coordinator is the best-case scenario for staffing the department's communication across digital platforms. This person needs to be well-versed in the technical nuances of digital media, to understand social trends and humor, to be plugged into all department operations, to have the ability to speak "digital," and to



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have the trust of the chief and command staff to speak on their behalf.

Unfortunately, most police departments don't have the luxury of having a full-time, dedicated position for social media, so staffing it as a collateral assignment is often the only option. Departments in these situations need to understand that it's better to be great (and engaging) on a few digital platforms as opposed to being mediocre on many. Also, if social media management responsibilities are shared among a number of officers or staff, it's very important to have a consistent sounding voice for the department, regardless of who is manning the channels at any given time.

If the thought of devoting limited staff resources to social media makes one cringe, consider this: what was the law enforcement landscape like when the community policing philosophy first entered the scene decades ago? At the time, departments redirected officers, staffing, and resources to community policing teams and units. The big push was to form community partnerships and solve problems together. If this sounds familiar, it's exactly what social media platforms offer: an opportunity to engage in an online community so that partnerships can be formed and issues can be solved in minutes, not days or weeks. Granted, nothing will ever replace face-to-face contact. Social media does not replace real-life contacts, but no one can deny the influences social platforms and mobile technology have on most people's day-to-day interactions. In an era when public distrust of law enforcement is arguably at an all-time high, the opportunity for a law enforcement agency to use digital platforms to highlight transparency and build community trust should not be ignored. Put in this light, the argument for full-time staffing makes a lot more sense.

For example, the Mountain View, California, Police Department has 95 sworn officers and serves a diverse community of approximately 75,000 residents in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2013, the agency converted a full-time, non-sworn PIO position to a social media manager position that included PIO and community engagement duties. The dedicated position to manage social media had a huge impact on growing an online community of residents who have come to trust and appreciate the openness and transparency of the department.

### Engagement: Going Beyond Comments

Responding to online comments is an absolute cornerstone to a vibrant and effective social media strategy. But, for social strategy, that's just the start. As mentioned in the Southwest Airlines case study, the social team at the airline not only responds to comments, but it also develops social media content to engage customers and

generate conversation.<sup>4</sup> A robust social strategy allows a police department to create engaging content. When this happens, the police department writes and controls the narrative. In community policing parlance, it's being proactive in identifying potential problems and addressing them online by creating a series of stories and posts around problem topics important to the community. These posts generate discussion online, which further facilitates dialogue between the department and the people asking questions. In addition to those who engage in conversation, there are many community members who might not be commenting, but are surely reading and watching these conversations take place.

The Jefferson County, Colorado, Sheriff's Office has a very active social media presence on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. Their digital communications manager, Dionne Waugh, is well known in law enforcement social media circles for her progressive use of digital platforms to create great content that encourages positive engagement with their followers. As one example, the recruit experience in the police academy serves as the backdrop for a number of social media posts that takes followers on a photo and video journey spanning many weeks, introducing them to the men and women who will eventually hit the streets to protect the community.

Over time, this approach to social media makes numerous deposits into the "bank" of community trust and generates "social currency." A department's social currency balance becomes vital when negative events take place or when prolific negative commenters (otherwise known as trolls) feel the need to sabotage the comments section of a department's posts. It's at these times that community members will often rise up and defend a police department and its actions—if the organization has built up social currency by engaging with its community.

Keep in mind, however, that negative comments are not necessarily a bad thing. Trolls and their comments aside (ignoring them is usually the best advice), most people who post negative comments on police department social media sites are blowing off steam. Even more important, most don't expect to hear back. So, writing those people back with options for resolution (e.g., "We're sorry you had that experience, please call us at \_\_\_ so we can learn more") shows that a police department has nothing to hide, takes complaints seriously, and is open and transparent. According to Jay Baer, a well-known social media customer service expert, answering customer complaints online increases advocacy for an organization. The inverse is true as well; ignoring complaints online will

greatly increase hostility and ill-will toward an organization.<sup>5</sup> Said another way, each negative comment is an opportunity for a police department to show professionalism, transparency, and integrity. It's not just the complainer who is reading a department's response. In fact, the entire world is potentially watching and listening to how a department responds. These opportunities to build and sow trust should not be overlooked.

### Conclusion

These are trying times for law enforcement. The media and special interest groups have long had the upper hand in controlling the narrative of a story. Now, that can change. Social media levels the playing field and allows departments equal access to the masses. Even more so, it gives departments an opportunity to dispel rumors, broadcast factual information, and build a loyal online community. To do this successfully, departments must invest the time, personnel, and resources into a robust social media strategy; one that prioritizes genuine dialogue so community trust can be fostered and flourished. ❖

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (Washington, D.C.: The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015), 2, [https://cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/taskforce\\_finalreport.pdf](https://cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/taskforce_finalreport.pdf) (accessed October 27, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>IACP Center for Social Media, "International Association of Chiefs of Police 2015 Social Media Survey Results," <http://www.iacpsocialmedia.org> (accessed August 30, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Laurie Shook, "Listening with Heart: Southwest Airlines Social Command Center Tour," Social Media Dallas, March 8, 2016, <https://www.smdallas.org/2016/03/08/listening-with-heart-southwest-airlines-social-command-center-tour> (accessed August 30, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Jay Baer, *Hug Your Haters: How to Embrace Complaints and Keep Your Customers* (Portfolio, 2016).



Visit IACP's Center for Social Media ([www.IACPsocialmedia.org](http://www.IACPsocialmedia.org)) for information, resources, tutorials, and more—all related to law enforcement's use of social media.