

PENNSYLVANIA

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COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
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Susquehanna County
Talks About the Impact
of Marcellus Shale
and
Cumberland County Talks
About Social Media

The County Social Media Plan

What do you want to accomplish?



By Emily Landsman, Founder & Principal
Media Consultant, Red Boot Media, LLC

Social media is not just about the tools you use online. It's about connecting with people. We know the next major evolution in communications is happening online, and rehashing statistics and numbers is somewhat pointless by now. The vast majority of the public is using at least one kind of social media tool; the goal now is to make sure the public sector takes advantage of the services that are out there.

Most of these social media tools are very inexpensive or free to use. The challenge is figuring out which ones will best benefit

your county and incorporating them into your overall media plan. When talking to local officials, I start with the basic question all major projects should start with, "What do you want to accomplish?" I'll go over a few of the big ideas to keep in mind while you build your framework and mention three of the most used platforms -- Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Social media tools can be powerful weapons in your election campaign. Using social media as an elected official requires a slightly different approach than a county might take. I talked to Berks County Com-

missioner Chairman Christian Leinbach about his experiences. I'll include some of his thoughts to share the individual official's perspective. Visit him on Facebook to see a great example of how to run a personal page as a public official at www.facebook.com/Christian.Leinbach.

A few assumptions before getting started:

- Your county has bandwidth to handle not only email but also social media and streaming video.
- Your county attorney/legal advisor is

on board. (Most are, but you want to be 100 percent sure. Even a very cautious approach is a great start!)

- You'll be conducting regular follow-ups with your county residents.
- Most of my piece will assume we're discussing the overall county message.

QUESTION: HOW WILL YOU MEASURE SUCCESS?

I spent the better part of the past several years talking to local government officials about Facebook plans for their governments or the public office they held. More than once, I was asked "I have a Facebook page, why isn't it working?"

Well, how do you want it to work?

What are you using to measure your county's social media plan's success?

- Number of likes or comments on Facebook?
- Followers, retweets or mentions on Twitter?
- Number of comments on YouTube videos?

How would you measure social media return on investment if you were a business?

Probably with an increase in number of sales. Look at your media plan as advertising. You want to get your message out, bring new people to your "business" and get them engaged by responding to your message.

Decide on your county's goals before starting or redesigning your media plan.

- Perhaps you want to focus on promoting a safe community and a healthy economy.

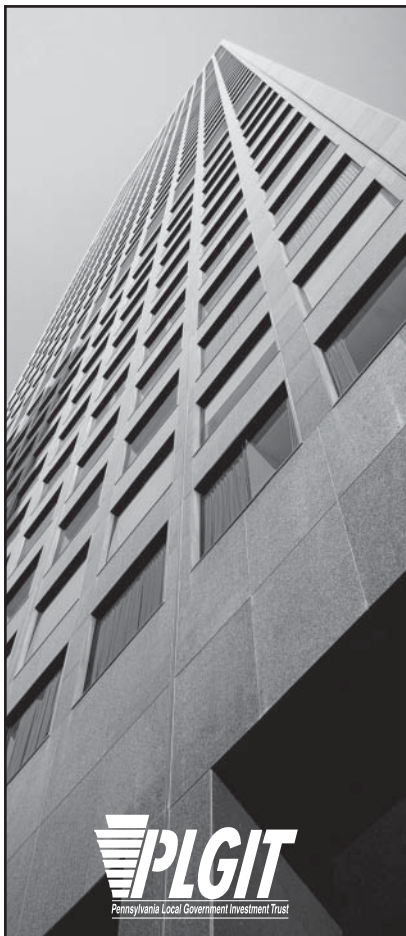
Now decide how you'll measure those goals.

- More community group meetings with local police or more neighborhood watches.
- New business openings or local business sponsorship of local events.

Make sure the messages you send out through your social media channels are targeted to the police, homeowners, school officials, or business professionals. You won't have any way to know if your Facebook, Twitter or YouTube campaign is working if you don't know what you're looking for.

Commissioner Leinbach uses Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Plaxo and has set up his own guidelines for personal interactions. On Facebook, he connects mostly with community members and local businesses, even if they have different views or political ideas. He is pretty strict about

continued page 48



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All facts and figures are as of December 31, 2011.

“unfriending” those who post inappropriate or offensive messages, though. The last two are more professional networking sites and are basically professional background and opportunities for group interactions and discussion.

QUESTION: WHAT'S WORTH SHARING?

Whether your social media outlets represent your entire county or just one department, deciding on the kind of information you will share shapes interactions with your followers. I've seen several public entities struggle with what they should share via social media. I suggest a list of standard messages (regular board meetings, questions to followers, staff features) to have a “bank” of posts to choose from when. When considering what to share, decide if your goal is to send an outward stream of information or to encourage dialogue.

The Goldfox County Board of Commissioners' * Facebook posts or Tweets might look like this.

- County commissioner meeting tonight at 7 p.m. Public comments accepted at the end of the Board's agenda.
- Learn about the county's “Going Green” initiatives for the future. *goldfoxcounty.com for information*
- Cold weather shelters will be open tonight and tomorrow night due to the drop in temperatures. *goldfoxcounty.com for locations*

The Goldfox Public Library might send these Tweets.

- Late fees on books rising from 25 cents per day to 35 cents per day beginning April 1.
- Want to learn about patio gardening? Meet gardening expert Twig Flowers this Wednesday evening at the library.
- Read any good books lately?

Do these questions encourage dialogue and later follow up or are they pretty

standard and boring? Should your posts be snappy or simply provide timely information? Consider the tone of your messaging.

Commissioner Leinbach uses Facebook to create dialogue. He values the direct interactions with his constituents that come from posting information and thoughts, interactions that most likely wouldn't have happened without social media. In this medium, he is able to control his own message and reply to concerns immediately. He doesn't post just anything, only information that is pertinent to his public life.

**There is no Goldfox County. I just like making up hypothetical locations, though I have seen posts similar to the ones above.*

QUESTION: WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Every successful team is lead by an effective leader. Part of your county's media plan must focus on your team's structure, even if there are just two members. A social media team is only as knowledgeable and functional as its players, with a leader who delegates responsibility and provides guidance towards achieving objectives and establishing a clear message.

Do the traditional media skills of a public affairs manager automatically translate to social media savvy? Not if tradition instills fear of change and not if it persists to keep the team from exploring new ideas. A well-seasoned traditional media professional will understand the messaging potential that social media holds and will embrace new tools.

On the other hand, knowledge of new media techniques and comfort using social tools are not necessarily a substitute for experience. Don't automatically assume a 23 year old should hold the power simply because they are young, but someone with exposure to social media tools and techniques can contribute great insights.

IT professionals might be experts at supporting database management software and keeping your network secure, but don't also assume that the IT department is the right place to put social media responsibilities just because it requires a computer (or smartphone). It is still a form of



Christian Leinbach, a county commissioner from Berks County, knows that it's important to reply to every post, whether or not he agrees with the poster's view.

communication that might be best handled by folks with media knowledge. In some counties, however, a combined team of media and IT might just be the right fit.

QUESTION: HOW DO I DO IT ALL?

I attended the National League of Cities' legislative conference last March in Washington, D.C. and sat in on an excellent session on social media. I heard the same things I had been hearing for years from county officials. "This stuff is great, but...

- I don't have time!
- I don't have staff!
- I don't know how it works!

I had a possible solution for these officials, so I said that making a plan and mapping out a strategy is the best way to help you get organized, even if you're by yourself.

Light bulbs went on, and people thought this was a terrific idea. I want everyone to think of making a plan first and reviewing

the tools they will use and the outcomes they expect.

Commissioner Leinbach knows that it's important to reply to every post, whether or not he agrees with the poster's view-point. A few minutes a few times a week is all you may need to devote to replying. While it takes some effort to monitor and respond to contacts as he does, the value of these interactions is very high.

You don't have to use every social media tool out there. There are dozens available now with more coming out all the time. Pick just a few, even one or two, and use them effectively.

NOW, GET STARTED!

Government is moving towards social media to better connect and serve the public, and county governments will find great benefits by playing an active role online to encourage citizen participation in the real world.

It may seem like a lot, especially if

you're not familiar with the concepts, but building a plan before starting will help make the most of your time online and provide maximum benefit to your county and your residents.

Emily Landsman worked on behalf of county governments at the National



Association of Counties (NACo) for almost nine years. In 2011, she founded Red Boot Media, LLC, a social media consulting com-

pany focusing on local government and small business. She has traveled around the country developing an extensive network of government and media connections. Emily earned both her BA and MPA from The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Contact her at emily@redbootmedia.com or visit www.redbootmedia.com

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