

Whether you're ready or not, here comes social media in government. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are platforms for exchanging information, and promoting online networks that foster interactivity and collaboration. While a younger demographic originally dominated the social media scene, today many groups are embracing the features of social media sites to communicate to mass audiences. When used in the public sector, social media can serve to increase the civic and political engagement of citizens. Consequently, many governmental agencies are in search of effective ways to adopt social media practices, and New York State county governments are no exception.

A 2015 study investigated social media use by New York State county governments, focusing on the strategies used to promote citizen engagement, and the ways social media is proving to be a valuable asset for both citizens and government. The investigation was comprised of two components. The first included interviews with county IT Directors, Communication Specialists, and Social Media Managers, and the second component relied on content analyses to examine current counties' social media practices, and their strategies for using social media to engage citizens.

The interviews revealed that NYS counties generally view the goal of their social media activity to be informational and transparent. While discussing goals, one employee stated, "It's information. First and foremost, it's information." Another highlighted the responsibility of governments to strive for transparency, and described social media as a tool to do so, stating:

"Let's show off our services, show off everything we're doing for the people. They pay money for the services they're getting from this county. Let's make sure we use more than just traditional media. Let's make sure we use social media to get the message out, to show what they're getting for their dollars."

Despite the primary aim to be informational and transparent, many county governments are eager to see an increase in citizen-government interactivity, but are unsure about how to use social media to increase citizen engagement. While several county representatives made statements similar to, "we would love more comments and feedback," uncertainties about how to improve citizen-government relations via social media were also expressed.

So, what are county governments in NYS currently doing well on social media? What could those new to social media consider doing to increase citizen engagement within their county?

A preliminary review of county social media accounts revealed that 67% of NYS county governments maintained at least 1 social media account, with Facebook and Twitter

being the two most prominently used platforms (31% of counties had a Facebook or Twitter account, and 23% had both a Facebook and Twitter account).

Five counties (outside of NYC) were selected for detailed analysis: Cattaraugus, Dutchess, Erie, Rockland, and Steuben counties. For each county, all Facebook and Twitter activity was recorded from January 1st to January 31st, including the content and number of county government messages, the content and number of citizen comments and county replies, as well as indicators of citizen engagement with the messages (“likes” and “shares” on Facebook; “favorites” and “retweets” on Twitter).

The analysis identified 8 prevailing purposes of the Facebook and Twitter activity of county governments: announcements, recognition, notifications, participation, recruitment, information, discussion, and advice. On both Facebook and Twitter, county government activities primarily served an informational purpose, with 33% of Facebook posts and 52% of Twitter posts providing general information to citizens, for example news stories. There was also a heavy presence of posting announcements (23%) and notifications (18%) on Facebook, and posting notifications (21%) and items of recognition (9%) on Twitter.

The analysis also enabled the identification of 18 commonly discussed topics of the social media messages posted by county governments. On Facebook, 40% of county government messages centered on public safety & emergency services, 27.5% referenced an event, and 23% mentioned a specific person(s), whereas on Twitter, messages primarily discussed weather and nature (34%), transportation and public works (28%), and events (17%).

To further understand how NYS county governments and citizens interact via social media, the topics of county government messages were evaluated for their capacity to generate indications of support (i.e. “like” or “favorite”) and information exchange (i.e. “shares” or “retweets”). The results suggested that, on Facebook, county posts about public safety and emergency services receive the most indications of support, while posts of health and well-being generate the highest rate of information exchange. When using Twitter, however, counties received the most indications of support and highest rate of information sharing when county governments posted messages about weather and nature.

So, if a NYS county government has made a decision to use social media, they can consider adopting the following social media strategies that are already evident on many NYS Counties social media pages.

One strategy is referred to as information exchange. Information exchange is accomplished by providing regular updates on local projects. This strategy produces an

informed citizen who believes they have the opportunities to access and comprehend information.

A second engagement strategy is known as collaborative engagement. Collaborative engagement occurs when citizens ask questions, and are acknowledged and responded to by the county. This strategy creates an empowered citizen who believes they have the right to participate.

Another strategy strives for the engagement of adversaries. In this approach, county governments allow citizens to freely use the social media site, producing an included citizen with a fair opportunity to express their voice.

The fourth engagement strategy serves to build a civil society, where information about concerns, policies, and programs, is shared in a networked way that creates an embedded citizen who maintains memberships and affiliations with a range of groups.

What's the take-away message, you ask? Social media is already helping several counties in NYS enrich their communication with citizens – for those seeking to enhance citizen-government relations and promote citizen engagement– you may want to consider “sharing” your newfound “like” for social media with your own county government!

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