Designing a Social Media Strategy to Fulfill Your Agency’s Mission

by Ines Mergel

Social media applications have become acceptable communication and interaction channels in the public sector. Driven by online behavior of citizens, available social networking platforms, and the governments’ need to become more participatory, transparent, and collaborative, public managers must design a social media strategy that helps to fulfill the mission of their organization.

Social Media Use in the Public Sector

Social media applications have become the newest wave of e-government and are making government websites more interactive and engaging. Tools such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and photo- and video-sharing sites have become accepted communication channels in the public sector.

Most government agencies have added a sharing button to their official website. These buttons encourage citizens to share government content on social networking sites and to engage directly with agency representatives via comment functions. Some even happen in close to real time.

Much of this trend was driven by the Obama administration’s 2009 call to “harness new technologies” to increase government’s participation, transparency, and collaboration, and “open new forms of communication between government and the people.”

However, every social networking site has its own goals, interaction routines, and culture. Government therefore is in a constantly reactive mode to provide guidance, best practices, and accepted information technology (IT) standards and regulations.

Third-party commercial social media services, such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, are hosted outside of government servers by companies who frequently change technological features. Agency IT professionals must keep up with those application changes so that citizen interaction is maintained and upgraded when possible. Changes to the agency’s social media policies often happen after major mishaps trigger the necessity for updated standards and policies to safely use social media services again.

Other substantial concerns include security and privacy issues, as well as open questions regarding records management, according to a Government Accountability Office report issued in 2011. While these concerns need to be addressed, many government organizations are still in the early stages of social media use and are concerned about much more basic questions, such as:

1. Why should an agency use social media applications outside its existing IT infrastructure?
2. Who is the local (or global) audience?
3. How does the use of social media support the agency’s mission?
4. Who should be responsible to provide and verify content on a daily basis?
5. What are the policies and rules that guide the agency’s online interactions?
6. What is acceptable citizen behavior on government-run social media accounts?
7. Who is responsible for content accuracy and corrections when invoking public discussion online?
8. How can agencies measure the impact of their online engagement and justify the resources needed to support social media activities with constraining budgets?

Agency leaders must approach these questions in a strategic manner as part of the overall communication strategy. The following design elements can help public managers to strategically approach the managerial and administrative decisions before they implement social media applications.

Social Media Strategy Design Elements

The most important driver for social media use in the public sector should be the existing organizational mission and communication strategy of the agency. The
GOVERNMENT EMBRACES NEW SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

organizational goals and objectives drive the extent and types of social media tools an agency should add to the already existing communication channels.

Setting Roles and Responsibilities
Based on the initial considerations, managers must consider the internal roles and responsibilities with regard to distributing the workload and decision-making capacities. Who within the organization will be responsible for content creation? Specifically, who will fulfill the role of a social media ringmaster: the strategist and visionary responsible for design, content oversight, campaign planning, analysis, and interpretation of social media analytics. Who can create and curate content and administer the different social media accounts? These tasks include daily routines for posting regular updates that also go on the organization’s website, as well as ad hoc campaigns or responses to nonroutine inquiries.

Providing Content
Content providers can be found across the whole organization. Responsibility to answer citizen questions can be distributed across many different departments or programs. Social media is inherently about content and interaction; content should not be limited to IT departments or public affairs offices.

After roles and responsibilities are assigned, managers must address appropriate content and online products. What content will most likely be of interest to an agency’s audience, how often does the content change, and what are the events that will draw citizens’ attention to the agency and the content provided? It is important to think about what kind of access the different segments of your audience might have. Are there potentially alternatives for accessing content posted to social media accounts to comply with section 508 of the Disability Act? As a result, adding social media channels will most likely result in repetitive content across different types of media, so that the content is available in text, audio, and audiovisual formats, and traditional and new media.

The intended purpose of social media applications is to connect users online with each other. Wherever people are interacting with each other, other formal and informal expectations are potentially clashing. The informal nature of online exchanges coupled with very little accountability and the notion of free speech oftentimes contradicts the etiquette of face-to-face interactions or formal interactions with elected officials and government agencies. It is therefore important to create an online etiquette

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Defining the Audience
Besides the mission and the core content an agency creates, it is important to understand the potential and actual audience so an agency can decide who will interact with the content and who should follow an agency’s output. Not every agency necessarily serves a highly diverse audience consisting of all Americans; instead many agencies have a very specific audience, such as professional organizations, which need to be identified. As a result, agencies might need to consider posting updates in both plain language for all citizens, and also the official language and vocabulary of special audiences, such as lawyers or bankers.

Depending on the audience it is important to think about what kind of access the different segments of your audience might have. Are there potentially alternatives for accessing content posted to social media accounts to comply with section 508 of the Disability Act? As a result, adding social media channels will most likely result in repetitive content across different types of media, so that the content is available in text, audio, and audiovisual formats, and traditional and new media.

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“netiquette”) and comment policy that states specifically what the acceptable online conduct is for the agency. The commenting guidelines should include directions for the type of comments that will be excluded and deleted from an official government channel, including explicit language, discriminatory statements, threats, hate speeches or endorsements of services and products. Any online communication should adhere to the same etiquette as face-to-face conversations. Agencies should accept and respond positively to differing points of view and always respect their audience.

**Finding the Right Tools**

One of the final considerations is the selection of the right social media tool or a combination of different social media tools and platforms that support the mission, content, and the expectations of the audience. The decision should mainly be driven by the behavior of an agency’s audience. Where are they already interacting and where are important agency-related issues discussed? Moreover, not every social media tool might be allowable or already accepted by the organization itself.

The General Services Administration has signed model terms of service agreements with many social media providers that can be adopted by other government agencies to safely interact with the public. Moreover, an important strategic decision is whether every subunit should be allowed to select the tools themselves or if there is one central team deciding and coordinating the social media channels for the whole organization. In case of the former, additional guidance might be necessary to create a corporate identity and design, social media policies to guide the behavior and a shared vision to fulfill the purpose and mission.

Note that the selection of a specific tool should be made as one of the last decisions in the strategy design process. It is more important to think about your mission, audience, or appropriate online content first before you decide which tools or combinations of social media channels you allow.

After all these strategic decisions have been made, information and guidance about daily routines, social media tactics, and campaigns should be developed. While there are always a few recurring events for which routines and schedules can be applied, government organizations also are facing organizational crisis situations or are running ad hoc campaigns that need to be appropriately supported and mediated through social media.

**Measuring Impact**

Finally, it is important for public managers and administrators to know if any of the online interactions are making an impact. Connecting to an active online audience can help an agency in times of budget cuts to determine the public impact of and support for sequestration of government programs and services. Similar to other forms of performance measurement in the public sector, social media needs to pass the litmus test: do interactions on a specific social media channel make a difference and are they designed to help fulfill the mission?
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Depending on the content, chosen social media channels (or mix-and-match of tools), an agency should constantly observe the online interactions and measure both with the help of quantitative (such as followers, numbers of retweets), as well as qualitative measures (sentiments and feedback) their online impact. Purely focusing on quantitative data won’t lead to the expected insights. Instead it is important to understand how issues are currently discussed among the audience(s), where and how issues are emerging, and how favorably the agency is discussed in the context of mission-related issues. Top management needs to be involved on these discussions to help interpret the metric and decide how to adjust the agency’s online tactics.

Social media is clearly here to stay—obviously not always in the form of Twitter and Facebook. The formal press release style still guides many communication efforts, but it is slowly supplemented with social media interactions. It is therefore imperative to help all public managers understand how to engage in meaningful ways online. Training is as important for nonusers as it is for users who are already using social media for their personal online interactions. It is however important to plan training to get non-users among your employees on board.

At the same time, it is important to think about training that helps digital natives, who grew up with social media, understand government requirements, laws, and existing regulations to help them use social media in responsible ways. Training should therefore be thought about as part of the overall social media strategy. One of the elements of training is to inform agency employees to use disclaimers on their personal and public social media accounts highlighting that they are not representing their employer’s opinion.

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