The Social Government

How governments are reducing costs and better serving constituents via social media

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Introduction

From crowdsourcing road repairs on Twitter to using Instagram to reduce security costs, governments have made great strides in using social media to improve services and decrease operational costs.

While many government leaders understand the potential benefits of social media, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the work ahead. With limited resources, governments need to ensure that social media initiatives produce measurable cost savings.

In this white paper, you'll learn how social media can improve constituent service while reducing costs and inefficiencies.

Here are the three key findings:

Innovation is not tied to large budgets. You'll discover how a regional government has built their social media strategy, showing that governments of all sizes can take pragmatic steps to reduce costs and improve service to constituents.

Utility is a core strategy for many government branches. Innovative apps and catchy YouTube campaigns might attract media attention, but you'll see how a transportation department and a national security agency have found success by creating pragmatic, useful content.

The biggest results come from centralizing social accounts, collaboration, and social governance. From controlling messaging to using social to bring together departments and teams, you'll learn why governments big and small are managing social media as a core system.

About this research

This white paper is based on interviews and best practices we've learned from working with governments around the world including the City of New York, Barcelona City Council, the City of Melbourne, the City of Boston, Australia Post, Centro, UK Trade and Investment, and Scottish Enterprise.

In addition to federal governments and major cities, you'll learn best practices from local governments and agencies including Fairfax County, the State of Illinois, Humberside Police, Metropolitan Police Service, and Transport for London.

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This white paper offers a global perspective on government and social media. To account for differences in terminology from country to country, we'll use a few standard terms.

"Constituents" refers to the people, citizens, or taxpayers that cities, government branches, and agencies are trying to reach and serve on social media.

"Federal government" refers to national government branches such as defence ministries, the U.K. Department of Education, or the National Treasury Board.

"Local government" refers to municipal and regional government branches such as county councils, district councils, metropolitan districts, and boroughs.

"Agencies" refers to ministries and organizations within governments responsible for specific functions such as public health, emergency response, or financial oversight, as well as federal organizations such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), CENAPRED, the National Environment Agency, or the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6).

"Departments" refers to the divisions within federal and local government. For example, a small city might have a communications department, tax administration, public works, parks and recreation, and police and fire departments. All of these departments will have different goals for using social media and perhaps different social accounts.

Steps to social success

How a small region built their social media strategy

In our experience, social media typically begins as a way to enhance emergency response and then spreads into other government functions.

To illustrate this development, we've retraced the steps of Fairfax County, a region in Virginia, United States serving 1.1 million constituents. Their innovation offers lessons for both large and small social media initiatives.

Fairfax County's social media journey

Eight years ago, Fairfax County began experimenting with social media to complement their comprehensive communications strategy. Social media was perceived as an add-on to other traditional communication strategies.

Their primary goal was to enhance emergency communications efforts with social media.

Collaborative beginnings

As reported in a study on innovative emergency response uses of social media by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security,[1] a fast-moving thunderstorm system called a derecho moved through Fairfax County in 2012 and resulted in downed trees, mass power outages, and boil water advisories.

Social media was used in combination with other tools and strategies including traditional media, web analytics tools, and a comprehensive communications plan.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "due to its ability to allow people to resend messages, Twitter was a valuable tool for informing community members about a 9-1-1 outage when phone lines were inundated during the derecho. It was also used to encourage standard hashtags to ensure everyone received consistent and accurate information."[2]

Fairfax County also used Flickr to assist with relief, asking constituents to upload their photos of property damage to a specific folder.[3]

This event demonstrated that social media could play a vital role in coordinating and communicating vital services to constituents, especially for emergency response.

"We've used social many times for emergencies including Hurricane Sandy, snowstorms, and a March 2015 escaped prisoner manhunt where social media played a defining role in the capture of the suspect."

Fairfax County

Expanding with social governance

Fairfax County started with Facebook and Twitter accounts, which were run by a handful of staff on social. Now, they have grown to 30 different accounts and more than three dozen staff serving constituents through social. None of the staff members manage social full time.

From controlling rumors during health crises to boosting adoption rates for animal services, social has become embedded in the daily interactions between constituents and many government departments.

But with this growth comes a need for oversight and coordination. With varying social media skill levels among different contributors, Fairfax County has focused on developing policies, centralizing governance, and training staff.

Social managed as a core system

To maintain consistency with this growing presence, Fairfax County organized their social media accounts using a social relationship platform, created processes for social media governance, and fostered collaboration among departments and agencies with a center of excellence.

With this foundation in place, they can improve internal collaboration, while better serving constituents. This also allows Fairfax County to connect social media activities to tangible public service outcomes such as boosting clinic visits and responding to misinformation.

Practical takeaways

- With teams, departments, and agencies working together towards a common digital strategy, you can cover more ground and reduce duplication.

- The effectiveness of social media in emergency response is well-documented. This underscores the benefits of using social media for utility.[4] Think of other ways that social media can be used to serve practical functions such as health promotion, crowdsourcing road repairs, and reducing the cost of service delivery.

- System integration is key to lowering risk (such as preventing security breaches of official accounts) and reducing the total cost of using social media to better serve constituents. This typically begins with a central strategy and social governance within a social relationship platform.

Expert perspectives

What's the economic pay back of social media?

We asked different government leaders and experts to answer a simple question: What can governments gain from social media?

Delivering useful, efficient public service

"The pay back of social has been felt in multiple ways for us. Our mission is to provide useful, timely, accessible and relevant content and information benefiting both an internal (ministry) and external (public) audience.

If we're receiving numerous questions about a topic, we understand the public may not be finding this information online so we look to our content strategy to address this (updated website, new website, blog).

To tackle this, we aim to create content that comes from public inquiries, addresses public concerns, or corrects misinformation while focusing on customer service above all else."

Russel Lolacher, Director of Web and Social Media, Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, British Columbia, Canada

A solid social media strategy can have exponential cost savings

"The application of government social media can certainly translate to tangible economic benefits, and we have seen this happen many times.

The key is to define a solid strategy, then track and evaluate the appropriate metrics. For instance, social media strategies that center on improvements to the customer service experience can result in a number of things, among them satisfied citizens and a positive perspective of the department.

This strategy can also change citizen behaviors in a quantifiable way, such as reduced counter visits to city hall, decreased wait times, and lower call volume. Investing in social can have exponential cross-agency benefits and cost savings."

Kristy Dalton, CEO Government Social Media and host of GovGirl.com

From a mayor's perspective, it's about involving, informing, and serving residents

"Social media has expanded engagement across the city, which is a powerful contribution to stronger democratic processes. It has increased the range of voices heard at City Hall.

From a practical point of view, it's been proven over and over that community consultation and input, early on in the process, allows for more certainty in final decision making, saving time and money in the long run.

This opens a dialogue that can develop and inform policies and actions, giving citizens another forum to help build the city they want."

Dean Fortin, Mayor, City of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada 2008-2014

4 key recommendations

Our research and interviews generated four key recommendations for better serving your constituents while reducing the costs of traditional communication channels.

Strategy

Cross department collaboration creates broad impact

One of the most significant shifts in the past few years involves the move from ad-hoc social media initiatives to central governance. This has a direct impact on the ability of social media to deliver significant cost savings over traditional channels such as email, phone, or website contact forms.

For example, when the Barcelona City Council audited their social media presence, they found 600 social media accounts and nearly 100 teams and departments sharing content, often with different accounts duplicating work.[5]

With so many accounts and teams speaking at once, Barcelona's citizens were confused about how to connect with their city.

"It wasn't a matter of empowering employees to be social," says Ruiz De Alda, Barcelona City Council's Digital Marketing Manager. "The issue was whether they were thinking strategically about it or not."

The audit also revealed social media experts who were achieving great results. These teams and departments had valuable best practices and skills that could benefit the entire city. So social took on a new role as well: helping to bring teams and departments together in order to share best practices and find new ways to solve common challenges.

For example, they consolidated their accounts into a social relationship platform. This gave visibility into social media activities across different teams and departments. They also created a center of excellence, which brought together different groups to share success and strategize new initiatives.

The new strategic alignment and collaboration drove a 293% year-over-year growth in constituent engagement. Social was the driving force which both made it easier for citizens to contact their city and helped the government collaborate and innovate better ways to serve citizens.

Tactics:

- Without a cohesive strategy, ownership, and accountability, it's difficult to deliver effective social media service to constituents. Begin by talking to different teams and understanding how your departments and agencies are currently using social media.

- Next, conduct a social media asset audit to reduce inefficient accounts, identify duplicate efforts by multiple departments, and identify gaps in workflows and alignment.

- From the audit, identify the teams and departments leading the way. Build their experience into a new central strategy and create a center of excellence to share best practices and align efforts.

Utility

Move from engagement to public service

Governments and agencies are learning that content and outreach can serve a very practical purpose and reduce the cost of serving constituents.

For example, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is an agency of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that has authority over the security of the traveling public in the United States. The agency uses Instagram to both entertain and educate travelers, posting bizarre weapons and items they find in people's airport baggage.

This engagement has a very tangible outcome: prevent passengers from making similar mistakes—mistakes which cause delayed flights, long lines, and higher security costs.

Likewise, we spoke to Russel Lolacher, the Director of Web and Social Media for the Ministry of Transportation Infrastructure in British Columbia, Canada. Mr. Lolacher is one of Canada's most influential experts on social media in the government sphere and was the first social media director in British Columbia's public service.

"Utility is absolutely a priority for us," Mr. Lolacher told Hootsuite. "Though we share and create a variety of content, being useful to the public is at the heart of our strategy."

In his role, he guides the social media strategies for @DriveBC, a travel information Twitter account that provides timely updates for road conditions around construction and closures, and TranBC, a multi-platform presence focusing on education, awareness, and insight into the ministry.

Their campaigns provide transparency into why the government closes roads and how they work to reopen them. They also offer safety tips for driving during winter, as well as reveal how some projects will impact travel routes.

"Our content calendar and engagement is based on seasons throughout the year, looking at ways we can provide answers and service to the public around the topics that matter during these times," says Mr. Lolacher.

The agency uses a combination of awareness and behavioral change campaigns. For example, their "Shift into Winter" campaign helps to remind drivers of winter driving habits. They partner with other agencies to increase awareness and develop content.

"We are looking at new ways of telling usual messaging. For example, incorporating pop culture references like Game of Thrones' 'Winter is Coming' to highlight winter driving safety or plain, blunt non-government type language for roadside safety ('Don't Hit People with your Car'). We also partner with other groups to extend our impact such as National Engineering Month, Earth Month, Rail Safety Week, and Bike to Work Week."

Tactics:

- Focus on being useful to constituents, rather than just building followers or counting retweets. Again, Mr. Lolacher offers this advice, "By being active on mediums or platforms the public is expecting us to be engaged on, rather than what has been traditionally used, shows we are putting the public first."

- To ensure utility, build content and engagement strategies around real problems constituents face. This can reduce costs (such as fewer phone calls to city hall) and change behavior (such as reducing the number of biking accidents with educational YouTube videos).

- Use data to refine your content strategy. As Mr. Lolacher advised, "if we're receiving numerous questions about a topic, we understand the public may not be finding this information online so we look to our content strategy to address this (updated website, new website, blog)."

How a national agency reduces the cost of traveler mistakes

As reported by AdWeek, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) uses Instagram to help educate Americans on what not to bring on flights.

By posting bizarre items they find in people's luggage (from replica grenades to improperly packed ammunition), they work to reduce the number of preventable mistakes. For example, hunters are allowed to pack ammunition in their checked baggage but often put it in their carry-on luggage.

It's these small mistakes that cause long lines, delays, and canceled flights—all issues that the TSA is helping to solve with social media.

"Sure, it's great to share the things that our officers are finding, but at the same time, each time we find a dangerous item, the line is slowed down and a passenger that likely had no ill intent ends up with a citation or in some cases is even arrested," Bob Burns, TSA's Social Media Analyst, told AdWeek.

Source: this story was originally reported in AdWeek[6]

Metrics

Measure efficiency and cost savings

Just because a Tweet with bike safety tips receives 100 favorites doesn't mean that your constituents clicked on the link or changed their behavior. It's up to digital leaders in government to ensure that program metrics (such as engaging citizens, driving web traffic, and increasing awareness) connect back to foundational measures such as cutting costs, increasing efficiency, and creating transparency.

One of the best examples of this comes from the City of Boston. The city invited residents to report potholes via phone, online, or by tweeting @NotifyBoston with the hashtag, #spotholes.

"Our city works best when everyone works together," Boston mayor Thomas M. Menino announced in a news release.[7] "With residents help we can identify and repair potholes more quickly than if Public Works did it alone."

In the two-week campaign, Boston's Public Works filled more than 2,000 potholes with help from social media and citizen reporting, a 333% increase in the number of citizen-generated reports compared to the same time period the previous year.[8]

The public could monitor the city's progress with an interactive map of all open and closed potholes, tracking the results and seeing the collective work of constituents and city workers.

Tactics:

- Hashtags are often underused as a data collection technique. As shown by the City of Boston's #spotholes campaign, hashtags can serve very practical purposes.

- Don't wait for analysts. Small cities and departments don't often have the resources for a dedicated data team. Instead, use a real-time social media analytics solution that is designed for non-technical employees.

- Be proactive. Real-time analytics can also alert your team to spikes in social media activity. Our clients have numerous success stories here including using real-time social media analytics to identify teenagers talking about guns at school to managing crowds at concerts and other live events.

Core System

Manage social as a core system for oversight and control

By consolidating departments, agencies, and individual contributors into a social relationship platform, governments can reduce inefficiencies, improve data collection, and move from ad-hoc programs to a central strategy. This is key to lowering risk and reducing the cost of serving constituents.

"The cornerstone of our citywide social media strategy is the understanding that daily engagement helps improve quality of life, but it also means we don't have to direct constituents to follow us during emergencies—they're already on board," says the City of Boston on their blog.[9]

With social media managed as a core system, it's simple for a government or city to immediately switch from everyday updates to emergency management. You'll be able to quickly respond to crises, align messaging, and coordinate with different agencies and departments.

It's not a small task but there is significant pay back:

- You'll gain better oversight and reputation management by tracking all social media activity in one social relationship platform.

- You'll realize the benefits of a large contributor pool, without losing central control of social media accounts.

- With unified sources of data (from multiple departments, teams, and agencies), it's easier to measure the impact of social media.

- Increased security and control over your social media presence, makes it easier to shift into emergency response if needed.

Tactics:

- As the City of Boston advised, "a strong externally facing social media strategy starts with a strong internal one." Begin by bringing together your agencies, leaders, departments, and teams for a summit, gathering input and better understanding the successes and challenges of social media across different functions.[10]

- Task a team to begin evaluating different social relationship platforms. Ask them to take ownership of the central strategy.

- Once you've selected a social relationship platform, begin building a launch and education strategy. This helps you to nurture social media skills across the organization and educate on social media policies and best practices.

Next steps

This white paper has shown there are a lot of pragmatic ways that your organization can reduce costs and better serve constituents through social media.

This gives your organization a solid foundation to embed social media into your current activities, improving the level of service for stakeholders, constituents, and taxpayers.

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