

Uniting Social Media Strategy

*A framework to coordinate service delivery
and incident communications for local government*



Welcome

TODAY, rapid change and new technologies have fundamentally altered the experience of visiting a destination or living in a community from what it was just a few years ago.

This report explores the role that social media can play in the continuing evolution of local communities, for the benefit of visitors and residents. It offers recommendations and strategies for shifting to a citizen-centric approach that enables government agencies to realize the immense potential of social as a communications channel between businesses, citizens, and their government.



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Why unite social media strategy?



COMMUNITIES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN SOCIAL. But in this digital era, the meaning of “social” has changed.

Online purchasing is overtaking the traditional visit to the mall. Communication via social media is embedded within our relationships with friends, family, and even brands.

Governments have acknowledged this shift, with 85 percent of local governments now present and active on social media.¹ However, social media processes and best practices remain fragmented as agencies and service organizations develop strategies in isolation based on their own experience and understanding of citizen needs.

This report is a call to put the citizen front and center. Working together, government agencies and public sector organizations that serve the same population should exchange ideas and social media best practices that deliver better citizen services and experience.

Consider the city, town, state, or province that you operate within as a brand. From local library branches to the road or transit system, every public sector organization owns a part of that brand. The overarching goal for this brand is to deliver seamless experiences to people as they move through and interact with different organizations in their day to day lives.

This report examines four citizen-centric scenarios that could benefit from a strategically united approach with organizations working collaboratively to prioritize, plan, and coordinate social media communications. It incorporates findings from the results we’ve seen with pioneering customers in cities around the world—as well as a pilot Social City workshop facilitated by Hootsuite in Vancouver, British Columbia—and outlines key considerations for the development of a social media strategy to encourage a truly united approach.





United social media strategy in action

WITH ITS MISSION TO CONNECT all New Yorkers and become the world's premier digital city, the City of New York provides an inspiring example. Multiple government departments across the city have adopted social media as a primary communications channel for engaging with and understanding citizens.

Engaging with citizens on more than 340 maintained social channels, the city has improved its emergency management processes, deepened citizen engagement—and more than tripled its social media audience.²

As cities mature, we see the next step in their evolution taking shape as they create connections beyond local government agencies, with strategic planning and coordination extending to public sector organizations and even the private sector.

This is best illustrated in responses to specific scenarios, such as the task force set up for the Boston Marathon and the speed at which the city responded after the devastating bombing in 2013.



A united strategy in action: Boston



Every year the city of Boston hosts the world-famous Boston Marathon, which attracts over thirty thousand runners and spectators from around the globe. The devastating bombing during the marathon in 2013 was a true test of the city's emergency response and the role that social communications play within it.

The police department's rapid response helped to keep citizens informed and safe and has since been described as "a watershed moment for law enforcement and social media."³

Since 2013, Boston's approach has continued to evolve. Every year there is now a marathon task force, which includes a broad range of organizations including local state and federal agencies and all the municipalities the runners pass through.

To ensure citizens receive consistent messaging and remain safe, the task force has a working group to agree on shared messaging. Organizations that own messaging create it for others to share, ensuring it reaches the widest audience possible without duplicating or contradicting other messaging.

This framework creates a hierarchy of information, with key messages amplified by all organizations while others more specific to a local area (such as a road closure) are shared only with the audiences they would affect.

With a collaborative approach and a commitment to continued development, organizations in Boston are building a strategy towards becoming truly united on social media.



Designing a shared vision



IN THE SECTIONS THAT FOLLOW, we explore four scenarios, variations of which routinely affect cities around the world.

In Hootsuite's Social City workshop sessions, we work with thought leaders from a range of public and private organizations to map these scenarios from the perspective of the citizen on social—taking into consideration what citizens' needs and expectations are likely to be, as well as how organizations can work together to deliver and even exceed them.

Some guiding principles remain the same. To build a successful social strategy, cities must engage the right organizations, and leaders from those organizations

need to be open to communication and collaboration. While details will differ depending on the scenario, one initiative emerges consistently as a critical first step in developing a social blueprint for your city: getting to know your social counterparts.

Use this report as a conversation starter to begin connecting stakeholders as a step toward identifying the issues that unite you—and toward designing a citizen-centric plan for tackling them on social.

Each of these scenarios have many moving parts. We focus on elements and moments where social can play a meaningful and beneficial part in the experience of the citizen.

UNITING SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY IN FOUR SCENARIOS



Responding to a security threat or disaster



Managing a public health crisis



Hosting an international event



Welcoming new citizens



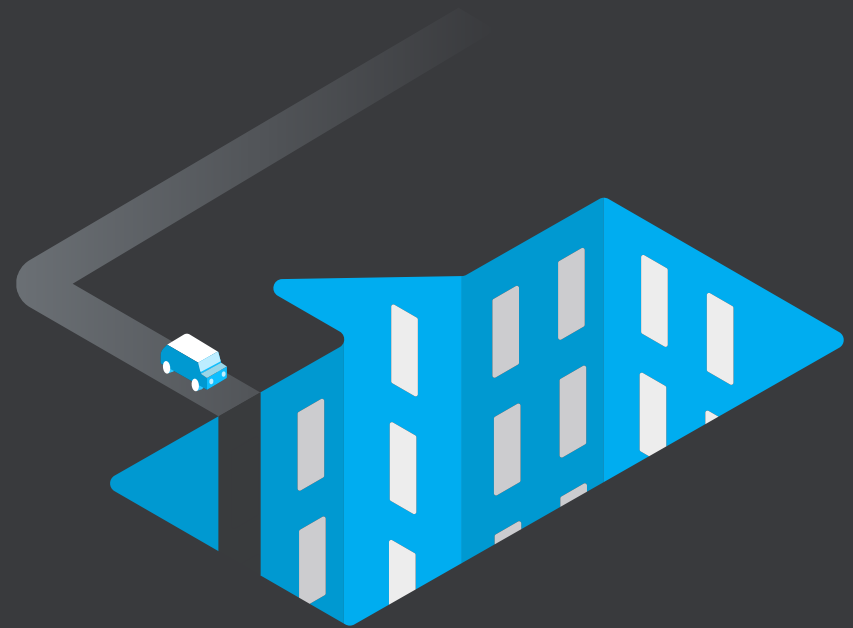
SCENARIO 1

Responding to a security threat or disaster

Security threats and natural disasters are an unfortunate and unavoidable reality for cities around the world.

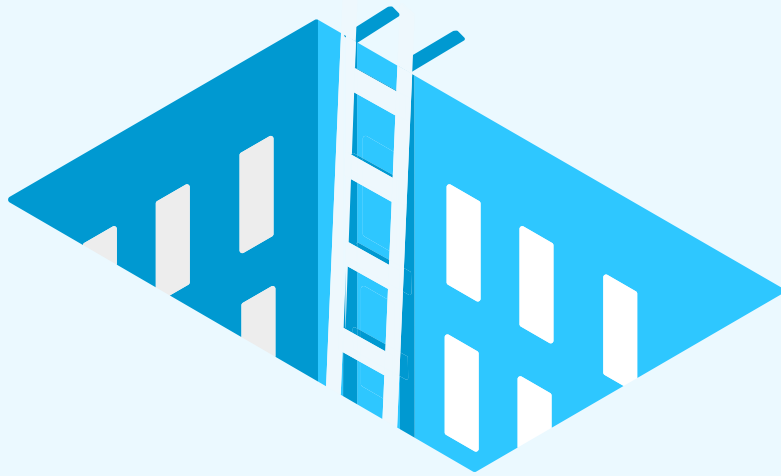
From Hurricane Harvey⁴ to false terror alerts on the London Underground⁵, we know that citizens turn to social media first to get the information they need during times of emergency. Technologically savvy governments are likely to have already incorporated social strategy into official government responses. But beyond governments, every organization that serves the community has a role to play.

In the event of a natural disaster, social media becomes a vital channel for keeping citizens informed. It can also, however, become a means by which rumors and myths can spread at speed. Social listening tools like [Brandwatch](#) and [Talkwalker](#) allow organizations to mitigate this risk by enabling them to analyze social conversations at scale and understand exactly how an issue is being discussed.



SCENARIO 1

RESPONDING TO A SECURITY THREAT OR DISASTER



Should false information begin to spread, social teams can respond quickly to contain it by issuing a rapid response and rebuttal from an official agency.

Connecting with social media influencers can also prove effective in situations where an organization needs to communicate accurate information quickly and to a large audience.

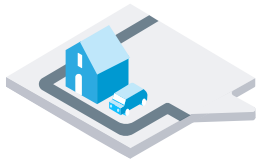
By identifying community influencers in advance—and by using social listening to identify and connect with them in real time during a crisis—organizations can more effectively reach out to citizens with the information they need. For a compelling example of this strategy in action, listen to [a webinar featuring Hootsuite and the City of Santa Monica](#), which responded strategically and effectively to a false bomb alert on social media.



SCENARIO 1

RESPONDING TO A SECURITY THREAT OR DISASTER

Strategic framework: Disaster response



At our Social City workshop, we assembled a cross-functional panel of social media pros from public and private organizations to design a working blueprint for this scenario. Here are the highlights of the strategic insights and plans created by the group.

WHAT ORGANIZATIONS COULD BE INVOLVED?

- Local government
- Health authorities
- Law enforcement
- Transit and road authorities
- Tourism agencies
- Utilities

KEY STRATEGIES

Use social media to educate citizens. Prepare citizens in advance with unified messaging about how they can be ready for the natural disasters most common in your region, where to find places of refuge, and what kits or other necessities can be collected in advance.

Listen to what citizens are saying. Use social listening to understand the needs of your population at scale. Also listen for false information; by moving quickly to publish approved messaging via official channels, you can control the spread of rumors and misinformation.

Streamline your response channels in an emergency. In the event of a natural disaster, have a plan in place to keep only primary accounts live. Post to other accounts to direct citizens in the right direction. Remove any scheduled posts to avoid confusion and conflicting messages.



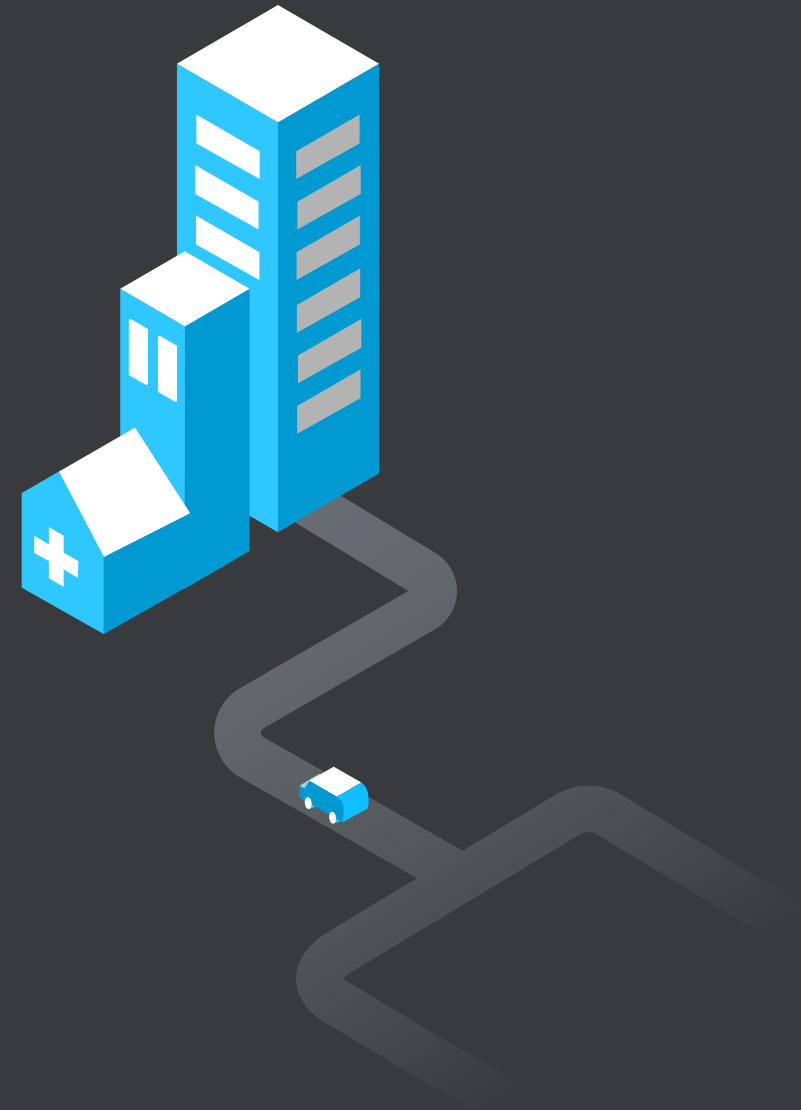
SCENARIO 2

Managing a public health crisis

The nature of public health crises affecting a population will differ from city to city, but what remains the same is that their impact is felt across all areas of society.

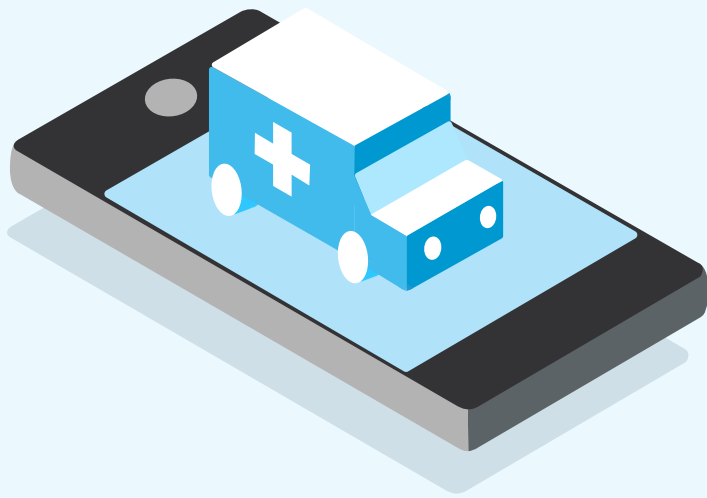
At our Social City workshop in Vancouver, participants mapped out ways that the city's ongoing opioid crisis could be better addressed using social media. The conclusions they reached are likely to resonate with other groups grappling with this issue, regardless of location and other specifics.

Anyone working in public health communications will know that popularizing messages and driving engagement can be a challenge. Many health crises are entrenched and continue without an end in sight—as is currently the case with the opioid addiction crisis facing Vancouver and many other North American cities.



SCENARIO 2

MANAGING A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS



For this reason, it's vital to clearly define the scope, audience, and success metrics of any campaign to address these issues from the outset. With clear goals in place, agencies and organizations can measure return on investment and tie it back to broader goals around reducing the impact of the crisis.

Another challenge often arises when the general population feels disconnected from the everyday reality of those directly affected by the health crisis. By taking a strategic approach to enlist and unite organizations with different audiences to share campaign messaging, agencies and organizations can reach a wider cross-section of society than they could through the efforts of a single government agency or public health authority.



SCENARIO 2

MANAGING A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

A united strategy in action: Massachusetts



Facing a growing number of opioid-related deaths, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts coordinated a digital outreach campaign to spread information about the epidemic.

Members of the Commonwealth's digital services team focused on a report brought about by legislation included in Chapter 55 of the Acts of 2015.⁶ While informative, the original version of what's known as the Chapter 55 report was a dense 96-page PDF written for epidemiologists.⁷

Working together, experts in user experience, data, content, video, and social media repackaged the report into an interactive, plain-language data visualization.⁸

The team shared the report in an organic social media campaign that focused on alarming statistics and clean visuals.⁹ Media outlets in Massachusetts and beyond quickly picked up on the messaging and shared it.

The interactive report saw 10 times the traffic of the original version, and even helped elected officials understand the complex crisis while making policy decisions.

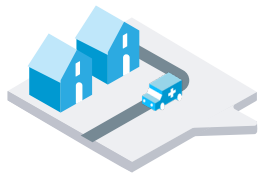
This digital outreach is just one aspect of the Commonwealth's plan to curb the epidemic—and the multi-faceted effort is yielding results. In 2017, opioid-related deaths decreased for the first time in seven years. The approach has been recognized at a federal level, with Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker appointed to a similar program with a national remit.¹⁰



SCENARIO 2

MANAGING A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

Strategic framework: Public health outreach



WHAT ORGANIZATIONS COULD BE INVOLVED?

- Local government
- Health authorities
- Law enforcement

KEY STRATEGIES

Define success metrics from the outset. Agreeing on the metrics against which a public health campaign will be measured in advance is key to being able to demonstrate its success. Social can play an important role in overcoming health crises, but overnight success is seldom a realistic expectation. Instead, identify specific metrics that will make a difference and track these to build understanding around the broader impact of the campaign.

Create focus around events. Rally around a day of action or awareness to bring a sense of urgency and a common focal point to an ongoing issue.

Use shared design to present a unified front.

Templated content helps multiple organizations quickly create and deliver content that's recognizably connected to a single campaign. Agencies and organizations can customize text depending on the channel and organization, but a common thread in the design is likely to make more of an impact and resonate with citizens.



SCENARIO 3

Hosting an international event

The opportunity to host a large sporting or cultural event is an honor for any city, bringing with it international attention, investment, and a surge in visitor numbers.

Along with all these benefits comes a need to engage multiple audiences—from superfans and interested citizens to those who are ambivalent or even unhappy about the event. Social is where fans go to share their excitement, and it's also where detractors go to vent their dissatisfaction.

With the right approach, every audience can be served with the content and information they need.

Along with an influx of visitors, a major event brings a certain level of disruption. Start by considering the entirety of the journey that your citizens and visitors will take, from the airport or train station to the road and transit networks. Increased traffic, road closures, and altered transit timetables are likely outcomes that agencies and organizations will need to communicate to the multitude of audiences they affect.



SCENARIO 3

HOSTING AN INTERNATIONAL EVENT

Strategic framework: International event



WHAT ORGANIZATIONS COULD BE INVOLVED?

- Airports
- Other ports of entry
- Transit
- Road authorities
- Tourism agencies
- Cultural agencies and organizations
- Event venues

KEY STRATEGIES

Tap into the value (and fun!) of user-generated content. This is where the most authentic sense of fun and energy from the event will originate, so play the role of amplifier of these posts. Tools like [Chute](#) and [Adobe Experience Manager Livefyre](#) make it easy to find user-generated content and integrate it into your wider social media content strategy.

Start small. Test out your principles and processes on smaller events, checking that the lines of communication function as needed between organizations before you face the added pressure of a larger event.

Engage with your global audience. Will your event attract an international audience? Keep language differences top of mind. To ensure you can engage the widest possible audience, invest in templated content that uses visual cues, symbols, and plain language.



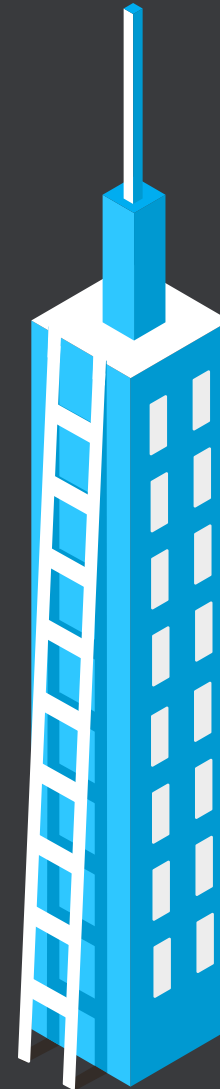
SCENARIO 4

Welcoming new citizens

As communities grow, an increasing number of new residents need help and support to overcome the many challenges they face when relocating.

Citizens settling into a new community need extensive information on everything from social security information, healthcare, and utilities to transit, community groups, and cultural events.

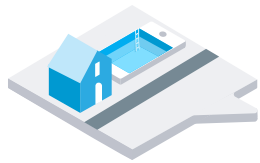
Across the spectrum, social media can play a central role as a source of advice and information. Many agencies and organizations have valuable information to share with new residents. Working together, multiple groups can collaborate to map out the journey these residents take, helping them understand what they need— as well as when they need to know it.



SCENARIO 4

WELCOMING NEW CITIZENS

Strategic framework: New citizens



WHAT ORGANIZATIONS COULD BE INVOLVED?

- Local governments
- Nonprofits and charities
- Transit
- Road authorities
- Child care providers and schools
- Local businesses

KEY STRATEGIES

Storyboard the journey new citizens take.

Many agencies and organizations in a community have valuable information to share with new citizens. Working together, multiple groups can collaborate to map out the journey these new citizens take, helping them understand what new citizens need—as well as when they need to know it. The different organizations involved

can then collaborate on promoting the right messaging and highlighting for new residents what they might need to do next.

Use hashtags to help people discover location-specific content. Hashtags specific to a locale can help people discover local events and celebrations on their social media network of choice. By identifying local champions and influencers from different communities, you can work with these people to help share content that's relevant to their audiences.

Don't make language a barrier. Consider new citizens who may be learning a new language as part of their move. Content that is simple but informative, making use of symbols and graphics, is likely to be most effective for the widest audience. If resources allow, translate content and use ads to target specific communities that might otherwise feel excluded.



The future of unified social media strategy



SOCIAL MEDIA CONTINUES to create new opportunities for local government to develop more coordinated and collaborative social strategies.

And beyond the opportunity to create improved experiences for citizens, there's also the opportunity for diverse groups and organizations to work together in ways that may not have been possible before, learning and sharing best practices along the way.

So what steps can organizations take to get started today?

More than anything, getting to know your social media counterparts across agencies and organizations is the first step that will make all the difference.

You don't have to do this in an "official" setting like Hootsuite's Social City workshop (though we're definitely planning to run the event in more cities soon). Getting started can be as simple as identifying the key organizations in your community and beginning to get acquainted with the people behind the handles. It's all about knowing the right people to turn to and

connecting with them before a situation arises that makes it necessary.

Identify the events and scenarios that matter for your citizens—both the ones you expect and those you don't. Then be proactive about reaching out to key government and public sector organizations to discover and build on the social strategy in response to each scenario. You might consider starting a private group on [Facebook](#) or [LinkedIn](#), or a [Slack](#) channel as a space to communicate freely about planning for the issues you face together.

Every organization serving the same citizen base has a role to play. Guided by a citizen-centric framework, organizations can work together to better understand citizens' needs, streamline efforts on social, and discover and share the best practices that will guide the development of united social media strategies.

Ready to take the first steps towards uniting your social media strategy? Connect with us and learn more about the benefits of Hootsuite for government at hootsuite.com/government



Endnotes

¹ StateScoop. [Local government overwhelmingly uses social media to disseminate info, lacks budget for social media activities](#). 2017.

² Hootsuite. [Case Study: City of New York](#).

³ Government Technology. [Social Media: Big Lessons from the Boston Marathon Bombing](#). 2014.

⁴ Time. [‘Please Send Help.’ Hurricane Harvey Victims Turn to Twitter and Facebook](#). 2017.

⁵ Huffington Post. [How An ‘Altercation’ Between Two Men Turned Black Friday Into Mass Panic On London’s Oxford Street](#). 2017

⁶ Commonwealth of Massachusetts. [Chapter 55: An Act Requiring Certain Reports For Opiate Overdoses](#). 2015.

⁷ Commonwealth of Massachusetts. [Legislative Report Chapter 55: Opioid Overdose Study](#). 2016

⁸ The Massachusetts Opioid Epidemic. [A data visualization of findings from the Chapter 55 report](#). 2016

⁹ Mass.gov on Twitter. [Opioid-related Death Rate in MA Compared to USA](#). 2016.

¹⁰ CBS Boston. [Gov. Baker: Massachusetts Should Be Model For Opioid Fight](#). 2017.

