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Facebook: Boon or Bane for Cities and Counties?

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Posted by [Neal Leavitt](#) on October 14th, 2011 at 1:19 pm



Unless you've been living in that proverbial cave, been mummified or have been cast adrift on some remote South Pacific island, you already know that Facebook is the world's most popular social media platform for sharing info/interacting with people.

Cities and counties are fast discovering that Facebook can also help local/regional governments keep in touch with their varied constituents.

But there are some caveats to consider before cities/counties take the social media plunge. A 2010 National Association of Counties survey of member counties revealed that 36% had a Facebook page and 41% said they used Twitter. But almost 80% said they had no social media policies in place.

Obviously this can be a significant problem – who’s responsible for managing Facebook – the city council? The county? The mayor’s office? A paid employee from one of the aforementioned? Many local governments may find themselves in a bit of a quandary about how to best proceed.

In fact, last year, the Redondo Beach, CA city council voted to scrap its Facebook page after the city attorney outlined a number of concerns about First Amendment and state legal requirements.

Some of these included:

- May city officials remove vulgar posts and misinformation, or are the comments protected by the First Amendment?
- If a quorum of city council members comment on a Facebook post, is it a violation of the open meetings law? Such laws often require advance notice of meetings and an opportunity to attend.
- Is the city obligated to retain user comments under the state’s public records law?
- Could the city face liability for employee comments deemed offensive in the workplace?

In California, for instance, it’s also important to note that just as emails can be subject to the state’s Public Records Act (CPRA), Facebook status updates (and tweets and blog posts) can be too.

To wit, according to a CPRA overview, “governmental records shall be disclosed to the public, upon request, unless there’s a specific reason not to do so. Most of the reasons for withholding disclosure of a record are set forth in specific exemptions contained in the CPRA. However, some confidentiality provisions are incorporated by reference to other laws. Also, the CPRA provides for a general balancing test by which an agency may withhold records from disclosure, if it can establish that the public interest in nondisclosure clearly outweighs the public interest in disclosure.”

Oy vey. Despite all the legalese to consider, Facebook can be a phenomenal digital tool to help with a city or county’s branding/marketing/new business development endeavors.

A few brief examples:

- The Columbus City Council uses Facebook’s Events tab to announce upcoming council meetings.
- The City Council of New York posts news and discussion items on its Wall and lets citizens comment/react.
- Panama City Beach, FL uses Facebook’s Discussion Board to not only solicit public feedback on key issues, but to clarify administrative policies.
- Back in May 2007, Greensburg, KS was just about wiped out by an EF-5 tornado. Facebook’s been used to solicit ideas from residents on rebuilding the town.
- Orlando, FL’s Facebook page includes posts for a free workshop for people facing home foreclosures.

Michael Riedyk, who blogs for GovLoop, an online community of more than 50,000 local/state/federal government employees and consultants, encapsulated nine ways city councils can use Facebook (and these are also germane for counties too):

- Announce council meetings and events
- Publish documents
- Talk to the people
- Use multimedia
- Provide elections information
- Offer more info
- Collect ideas and feedback
- Discuss issues
- Use a thematic approach

Bottom line? Facebook – and for that matter – other available social media tools and platforms – can significantly enhance a city and/or county’s image and provide valuable information to constituents. Just make sure you have a social media policy in place before going full tilt with a Facebook page(s). It may take a bit of bandwidth to develop this, but you’ll give yourself a digital high five afterwards for doing so.

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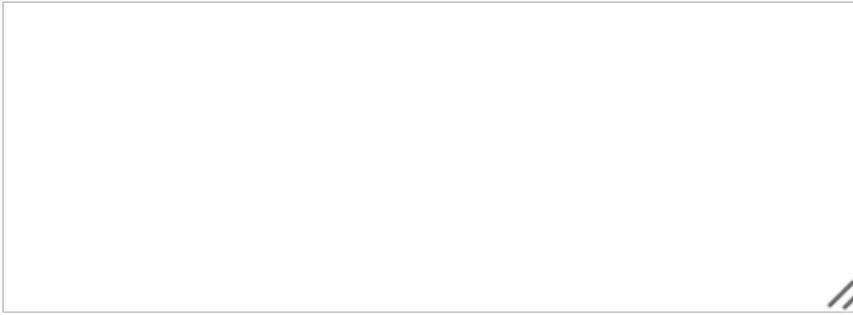
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