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Police and Fire Departments Embracing Social Media to Better Serve the Community

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Posted by [Neal Leavitt](#) on October 24th, 2011 at 8:32 pm

Cops in your neighborhood are still chasing down the bad guys and bringing them to justice, and firefighters continue to risk their lives to save people. In addition to protecting the community/putting out fires, odds are you'll now find both frequently tweeting, texting and posting to provide valuable information. In short, social media's fast becoming an indispensable communications tool for your local police and fire department.

To rip part of a line from a poem from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "let me count the ways."

Last September, an elderly Colorado Springs, CO man went missing. The Colorado Springs Police Department (CSPD) posted a photo and information on its Facebook page. Less than a day later, he was found safe as a

result of someone seeing the photo online and spotting the man in the community.

Also in Colorado Springs, a fire broke out in an apartment complex. The first images appeared not on TV or the local newspaper's web site, but were posted to the Colorado Springs Fire Department's (CSFD) Twitter page, then utilized by traditional media.

In Oregon, OH, Detective Sgt. Tim Zale posted online surveillance video and photos of a couple who allegedly stole purses from employees at a hospital and elementary school. The next day, the culprits were caught thanks to some Facebook friends.

While Zale welcomes the tips, he's asked that residents call these in and not reply directly to a Facebook posting "only because you might be wrong and we've had that happen, or you're subjecting yourself to becoming a witness in court. If you call me and you have information, you will remain anonymous." Zale added that on Twitter, users can send a direct message that's delivered privately and can't be seen by anyone other than the recipient.

A few other Ohio police departments are making good use of various social media tools. The Geauga County Sheriff's Office posts arrest warrants on its Facebook page. On a number of occasions, people have either turned themselves in or someone who saw the information on a particular suspect tipped off deputies leading to arrests. In nearby Lake County, the sheriff's office uses Facebook to post crime prevention tips along with links to press releases and relevant topics in the media.

"It gives us a way to manage the news a little bit ourselves," said Sheriff Daniel Dunlap.

Residents in the unincorporated town of Newcastle, CA, near Auburn in Northern California's gold country, are using social media to help the Newcastle Fire Department raise about \$1.5 million for a new fire station. The department was operating out of a now condemned building and has since moved into a 1990 camping trailer. A series of Tweetups have been organized to complement more traditional fundraising methods. The seven Tweetups have helped, but the fire department hasn't yet raised enough money to get design/construction underway for the fire station.

In Mesa, AZ, just outside Phoenix, MARRISA Ramirez-Ramos, fire and life safety education specialist, utilizes Twitter and Facebook to send out prevention tips, especially during monsoon season, when 911 calls can easily triple with people trapped in their cars from flooding. She also uses it to publicize events including immunization clinics and car-seat inspections.

"If I can get the media to pick up a story because of Twitter, then I know it's reaching a wider audience and could very well boost event attendance," she said. "In addition, many of our followers retweet our events and promotions which further increases our reach."

Larger cities, not surprisingly, are using social media to personalize community outreach efforts. The Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) has two Twitter feeds: @LAFD for news alerts; @LAFDtalk for direct communications between citizens and the department. The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD) posts alerts and other information on its Facebook page, through its Twitter feed (@LASDNews) and via a YouTube channel.

"You're talking about direct delivery," said LASD Captain Mike Parker. "Text, Twitter, Facebook – along with phone calls -- this provides the transparency the public really wants."

Cross country in Boston, Facebook has become a popular venue for the Boston Fire Department (BFD) to post updates on hiring information, testing dates, links to news articles about the department, apparatus purchases, community outreach programs and photos.

"Reaching so many people in such a short time frame is something we couldn't have done without creative use of this media," said BFD Commissioner Roderick Fraser.

While social media is an invaluable tool to increase community participation, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) offered a few caveats that also hold true for police departments. The model policy issued by the IAFC sums it well – as public servants, members represent their organizations to their communities and as such, are held to a higher standard of conduct to ensure public trust and confidence.




“We need to think before we hit the *Send* button,” advises the IAFC. “If you have a concern about what you want to post, don’t post it. Your gut instinct is usually correct.””

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Glad to read this post. Just yesterday I heard for the first time how our first responders are using Social media to assist them in their jobs. This was in relation to the capture of the escaped convicts in Indian Town. So amazing that my grandchildren are teething on technology.

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