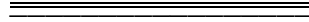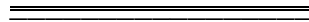# The Bill Blackwood
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Utilizing Social Media in a Law Enforcement Setting

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A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College

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ABSTRACT

Social networking has become increasingly popular among many different groups of people. Many progressive law enforcement agencies around the country have embraced social media, while others choose to shy away from the technology. The numbers of social media users has grown exponentially over the last few years. In order for law enforcement agencies to continue to be able to communicate effectively with the citizens they serve, they must be willing to adapt to the concept of utilizing social media. Social media can be an effective tool in promoting transparency in the agency as well as opening the door for a new way to solve crime.

Opening the door to social media will promote a "two-way street" of communication. The professional law enforcement agency can not only communicate with its citizens, but citizens are empowered to communicate back with the agency. Although social media communication is obviously less formal, getting the citizens to interact with police can be a great building block for future communication efforts. Building policies that regulate the use of social media by the agency and by the user will ensure proper usage and decrease liability. Agencies that jump feet first into a social media application with this information in mind will be on the cutting edge.

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION

During the last few years, social networking sites and the use of such have grown exponentially. Social media, the product of social networking sites, refers to activities among groups of people who go online and use the internet to share news, knowledge, and information. Some examples of online social networks include LinkedIn, MySpace, Ning, Bebo, Twitter, and Facebook. One of most popular of these examples is the social networking site Facebook. In order to get an accurate picture of how important social networking sites like Facebook have become, one must examine these statistical figures taken from Facebook's Key Facts page. According to Facebook.com, Facebook users equaled 1.5 billion as of June 2013. On average, there were 699 million daily active users in June 2013. There were "819 million monthly active users who used Facebook mobile products as of June 30, 2013" (Facebook, 2013, para. 3). Another social media site, Twitter, is a microblogging/social networking service that allow users to send and receive brief text based messages that are referred to as "tweets". Just like Facebook, Twitter users can access the subscribed to information by website or cellular phone. Anyone who has signed up for the service and chosen to "follow" will see the business or agency "tweets."

Today's law enforcement agencies face many challenges. Effective communications are a challenge for today's public safety organizations. Law enforcement agencies must educate themselves and have an open mind to the benefits of using a social networking site such as Facebook. Social media used by law enforcement agencies can enjoy the benefit of increased community interaction since interactive communication is the basis of any social networking site. According to the

International Association of Chiefs of Police (2013), "The world has embraced social media and is using it in new ways every day. Organizations in any arena that dismiss social media will find themselves falling behind. Law enforcement agencies can use social media tools for various functions" (para. 3). Law enforcement agencies utilizing social media can post any special alerts or community events. They may also choose to share photos, department news, videos, or engage in community outreach projects. Some agencies have even used social media technology to help solve crimes. Law enforcement agencies should utilize social media to promote and more effectively make their agencies transparent.

POSITION

Since the growth of social media has become overwhelming, police agencies can capitalize on the growth and shed a shining light on their respective agency. According to Brake and Safko (2009), there are three rules for social media in a business setting. In short, the rules define social media as conversation promoters. Businesses can help shape comments but do not have complete power over them. Lastly, all feasible business relationships are based upon the power of influence. Police agencies have an unmistakable service they provide. Police services are necessary so public order can be maintained.

If agencies want to promote the good things they are doing, they must rely on the resources that will allow them to promote more of the "good." Social media provides a means by which agencies can promote the positive attributes of their respective agencies. In today's world, large companies, government run agencies, and at home small business are all subject to public scrutiny. Customers are going to talk about,

complain, and discuss how businesses and agencies are perceived. Since social media sites such as Facebook allow for users to exercise their right of free speech, users do not need permission to talk or make posts about a certain entity or business.

Perceptions of a law enforcement agency or business could be positive or negative, depending on the customer's experience. Many times, in the law enforcement realm, those who come in contact with a law enforcement agency or a representative of the agency could be negative or unpleasant. For example, during the type of encounter when enforcement action is warranted, someone could form a negative perception because they received a citation, or notice to appear, from a police officer. Since the issuing of citations by law enforcement officers is a discretionary function, a citizen who receives a citation may have a negative or distasteful attitude regarding the officer and the agency the officer represents. An agency that promotes itself using social media can counter and sometimes redirect some of this negativity.

Once an agency chooses and builds a social media website, it is then that the law enforcement agency itself has the opportunity to directly influence how the agency is perceived. If the public finds interest in an agencies social media website, and in the news and stories they have chosen to promote, then the public will be more likely to go directly to the agencies social media website for information, rather than the mainstream media. Carefully deciding and studying what to post on a social media website will cause people to come back and visit the site for the latest news, stories, or what may be happening in the users own neighborhood. According to Stevens (2010), "Social media tools offer police departments a way to listen to their citizens and hear what is being said about their department, crime, the quality of life, and events" (para. 1).

Empowering the people and providing them with the opportunity to interact is also a powerful tool in garnering support for the agency. Sites such as Facebook allow for users to post their feelings in the form of comments. Agencies that choose to utilize social networking sites should avoid using them as a one way communication effort. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (2013) indicated, "Where traditional forms of communication tend to be one-way communication, social media facilitates conversations and interactions among users. Users are also able to decide what content they want and how they want to receive it" (para. 2). The department can encourage its social media followers to "like" their page, which will allow followers to subscribe to the agency's updates and news stories. The agency must then proactively respond to comments, inquiries, or conversation left on the social media site. Agencies failing to respond to user comments, leave communication a one way, dead end. Responding to user comments also helps garner agency support to build a bridge between the agency and the social media consumer. This relationship once built, will let the user know that the lines of communication are open and the agency is striving to be transparent. Forst (2008) stated, "The 21st century finds the police more capable and effective than ever before. Police operations are also more transparent, along with the operations of most other public agencies" (p. 1). In order to remain transparent, agencies must be willing to share information with the public.

In a survey conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) (2012) on law enforcements use of social media tools, the results showed the most common social media use, nearly 77%, by respondents of a survey were investigations. There were nearly 600 law enforcement agencies from all but two states in the United

States that contributed to the survey (IACP, 2012). In addition, research by Lexis Nexis (2012) revealed that four out of every five law enforcement professionals use social media for investigative purposes. There have been many instances where law enforcement agencies have used social media to post suspect photos or surveillance video which later led to the suspect's identification or capture. Thomas (2013) cited that the New Hartford police in New York started a Facebook page. They posted a surveillance picture of a robbery suspect on their department's Facebook page, in hopes of someone recognizing and identifying the suspect. Within 30 minutes, they had the name of their suspect.

Arlington, Texas police department, a community situated between Dallas and Forth Worth is home to approximately 380,000 people. In a case study by Christopher Cook, Arlington Police Department chose to use Twitter to promote their agency. Cook (2013) said "when staff first proposed a "tweetalong", many people laughed at the term" (para. 2). A tweetalong is a virtual ride-along that uses messages sent via twitter (tweets), to communicate with followers. Cook (2013) also stated, "The first Arlington Police Department tweetalong featured the Chief Theron Bowman riding along with a DWI enforcement unit… the tweetalongs have become increasingly popular…..there has been increased engagement with more people submitted tips and sending positive feedback" (para. 2).

An Astoria, Oregon teenage driver posted on his Facebook page that he apologized for whomever's vehicle he had hit. The teenager made reference to driving drunk on his Facebook page. Police were then tipped off to the post, by one of the teenagers list of 654 "friends." Police went to 18-year-old, Jacob Cox-Brown's

residence, and found a car that matched the damage at the scene of the hit and run

accident. Brown was arrested on two counts of failure to perform the duties of a driver

("Teen arrested," 2013).

Some law enforcement agencies have chosen to utilize more than one form of

social media. The use of more than one form of social media can assist law

enforcement agencies in reaching out to those that may only be subscribing to one form

of social media. Diversifying among several social media options will give the law

enforcement agency the increased opportunity of reaching more people.

COUNTER POSITION

Some law enforcement agencies are skeptical about initiating a social media

application at their agency. As indicated by Hanson (2011), "Some departments,

especially larger ones, shy away from using social media, fearing they'll be

overwhelmed by citizen comments" (para. 11). Once a law enforcement agency

decides to delve into the world of social media, they obviously open themselves to

further scrutiny by their social media followers as well as accept inherent risks. Agency

leaders must recognize that in years past, when their agency has made media releases,

readers at that point were provided the opportunity to pass judgment on how the agency

handled the situation. Judgment is passed on most official actions, even if official

information is not released to the media. From this perspective, one could surmise that

citizens have the freedom to agree with or publically criticize, regardless if an agency

participates in any social networking sites or not.

 In an article written by Syme (2012), she offers tips that can help navigate the

situations where agencies are faced with handling negative social media comments. A

posting policy is critical. A law enforcement posting policy should be prominently displayed where a user can easily access it. The policy should restrict any posts that are threatening, abusive, obscene, indecent, illegal, etc. The policy should define clear elements that may cause a post or a user to be hidden, deleted, or blocked. An agency can filter public posts and comments by using permissions tabs and settings. Agencies should be discriminatory about "liking" positive posts. Agencies are cautioned about being selective about deleting, hiding, and blocking posts, and, lastly, they should allow people to post their opinions even though the opinions may not be agreed upon by the agency or business.

Allowing social media users to vent should be perceived as a delicate balancing act. Those in charge of managing law enforcement social media sites should partially rely on any spam filters which they have set up. Those followers who choose to criticize by violating pre-determined policies will find their comments not being posted publically. Law enforcement agencies that choose to delete comments from their social media websites that they do not necessarily agree with, can face further scrutiny in answering questions why the posts were taken down or deleted. Honolulu Police Captain Andrew Lum is being sued after a complaint was filed in the United States District Court. The lawsuit alleges that that Honolulu police unlawfully controlled their Facebook fan page in violation of the right to free speech. Further, the complaint alleges that the Honolulu police discriminately moderate their page by deleting comments or posts that make unfavorable comments about the agency. The results of this case are still pending ("HPD sued," 2012).

Those in charge of agency social media websites can be trained not to take comments or criticisms personal. Letting users vent, as long as they do not violate established policies, must be carefully weighed out. Agencies may consider using public information officers (PIO's) as agency social media representatives. Most PIO's are familiar with what types of information the law enforcement agency is accustomed to releasing. Once the law enforcement agency establishes a good follower base, the good comments left on social media websites will most likely far outweigh the negative comments meant to do harm.

It was noted in an article by Starke (2013) that social media has played an important role in finding missing persons, but social media could hamper the effectiveness of the investigations. This came as Australian Rachael Moritz was reported missing. Family, friends, and loved ones began to set up pages and websites in attempts at helping police locate Moritz. The sites had to be shut down after they were flooded with false information. In this incident, family members of the missing woman had no ill intentions of clouding the waters. Families faced with this type of situation feel better after setting up social media sites because they are actively doing something to find their loved one.

In cases such as this, social media websites that fail to be actively monitored by law enforcement often breed misinformation. So some critics, including law enforcement administrators, may argue that the rapid sharing of information may pose additional problems. Misinformation is very easy to share when each user is entitled and highly encouraged to share the information they receive via social networking sites. After all, sharing information and communication is the main purpose of social media.

So after receiving the information of a missing person, the user may then feel compelled to add their comments and pass the information on to their friends. Since social media is based upon sharing, now these friends share with their friends, and the process repeats itself. In cases such as these, users who utilize mobile devices can within a few minutes, receive information, add any comments about the situation, and then share their speculation with a virtually unlimited number of friends. One inaccurate piece of information can get continually added to it until there is no truth to any of the information.

The sharing of misinformation when a law enforcement agency is trying to conduct an investigation causes investigators to face additional hurdles. Law enforcement administrators may be forced to add additional manpower to sort out misinformation. In these cases, time spent weeding out misinformation could be better utilized to follow-up more productive leads. Law enforcement agencies, when faced with this type of harmful impact on police investigations, can easily divert much of the false information by discouraging family members of victims from using separate social media websites for the reporting of information and leads. Rather, the family of these victims should be instructed to encourage that all tips and information leads be reported directly to the investigating law enforcement agency.

Social networking sites encourage users to be more public about their personal life. Privacy concerns definitely come into play and are one of the drawbacks to utilizing social media. Dwyer, Hiltz and Passernini (2007) stated, "Studies have indicated that users will express very strong concerns about privacy of their personal information, but be less than vigilant about safeguarding it" (p.4). While at one moment a photo of

friends consuming alcohol together may seem risk-free, the image may appear objectionable to a law enforcement agency conducting a background investigation on a police applicant. Most social networking sites allow the user to control how the information they want to shared to be posted. User privacy settings should not be forgotten about and are an integral part of controlling the information the social media user is not intending to release.

Too much freedom of speech could prove harmful. Law enforcement agencies are not exempt from the opinions of the personnel they retain. Employees of a law enforcement agency have a definite right to their opinions. They also have a right to the freedom of speech. However, these opinions and free speech rights must not interfere with or bring discredit upon the employing agency. As stated by Norwood and Waugh (2012), "When it comes to social media, there is no better advice than to *have a social media policy*" (p. 31). Creating a policy that fits the needs of the department or agency is paramount in countering the release of harmful information. Law enforcement agencies that choose to ban the employee use of social networking can be counter-productive. Establishing a well thought out set of rules gives the employees a set a parameters they must operate within in order to maintain the integrity of the agency they are employed with. A social media policy should clearly articulate all expectations so that the employee understands his/her role and the employer understands their role (Norwood & Waugh, 2012, p. 31). The rules may also outline how social media content will be organized, prepared, stored, and circulated. A solid policy will dictate who controls information. A clear set of parameters will allow for healthy development and

growth in an agency and lay a foundation where employees and employers can trust one another.

The main focal point of this paper is to encourage law enforcement agencies to utilize the tools available to them. If agencies fail or refuse to promote themselves in a good way, this leaves an open door and an increased chance for the agency to be criticized negatively. There are numerous technological advances that the business world relies upon. Staying in tune with technological advances helps keep law enforcement agencies on the cutting edge. The fear of the unknown is a real attitude and feeling that law enforcement leaders must overcome. A quote by T. S. Eliot says "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go." Professional law enforcement agencies should research, seek out, and deploy all available tools that not only promote the agency but cause the agency to rise to a standard of excellence.

RECOMMENDATION

In today's world, there are many forms of social media available. Some of the most popular include Facebook and Twitter. These kind of social networking sites put power in the hands of the user. Law enforcement agencies wanting or needing to promote their agency first have to stay open minded. Proper selection of personnel is important in deciding who will facilitate the social media needs of the agency. It is a good idea to have PIO's taking on social media projects as they are already somewhat familiar with what information should or should not be released. Just like effective communication is key to any sustainable relationship, law enforcement administrators must communicate with the public they serve. There were one billion monthly active

Facebook users as of October 2012. This statistic shows that people are flocking to social networking sites. These sites allow almost immediate access to news from friends, or depending what the user subscribes to, news from more traditional news sources.

Professional police agencies must realize that social media is on the cutting edge of today's communications. Since police agencies have begun using social media, they are more frequently using the technology to solve crimes. The social media platform allows law enforcement to quickly disseminate information on crimes or any events or circumstances which may affect the safety of the community they serve. Police have solved crimes ranging from robberies to hit and run accidents. In these cases, the agencies faced a lesser chance of the crimes being solved, without the use of the social networking site. Since news on social networking sites is shared rather quickly, agencies must also remember that getting in front of hot topic issues will cut down on rumors and the spread of false information. This can leave members of the public with a stance that their respective police agency is transparent and forth coming.

Law enforcement administrators should not be swayed by the fear of criticisms expressed by social media users. Savvy agency leaders will realize that the agency is going to be criticized regardless if the agency participates in social networking. The participation in social networking gives the agency the opportunity and the ability to get positive agency news out to the public. Although the agency will face negative comments, those in charge of the social networking sites will be able to re-direct any legitimate complaints or issues. Likewise, those in charge of these sites will learn that allowing some venting by social media users will likely be healthy to the agency and the

user alike. Research showed that agencies that fail to utilize social media are behind

the curve (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2013). With proper training and

a clear and direct set of control policies, law enforcement agencies can feel confident

that engaging and including themselves in social media will benefit not only the agency,

but the agency employees, and, most importantly, the consumers or citizens.

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