

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Social Media:  
An Indispensable Tool for Law Enforcement**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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## **ABSTRACT**

As the use of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter continue to rise across the country, many law enforcement agencies have learned to use this relatively new technology to help perform a variety of police functions. Social media is being used as an investigative tool for intelligence gathering, evidence collection, and background screening. It is also used for the purposes of recruiting and a direct means of communication with agencies and the public. Despite the many benefits and growing popularity of social media, many law enforcement agencies still refuse to use social media as a resource and are wary of the impact it may have on their individual departments.

It can be argued, however, that in order to stay effective and relevant during this new age of digital communication, law enforcement agencies must embrace social media and should use it to communicate with the public, gather evidence, and recruit and hire new personnel more effectively and at a lower cost. As this modern means of communication continues to shape and reshape our culture, law enforcement agencies must incorporate fresh investigative methods and continue to adapt to the latest technologies in order to remain effective and relevant.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a report issued by the Pew Research Center, researchers concluded that “As of May 2013, almost three quarters (72%) of online U.S. adults use social networking sites, up from 67% in late 2012” (Brenner & Smith, 2013, para. 1). Although social networking sites have become more commonplace over the past two or three years, the social networking phenomenon is still relatively new, starting around 2005 with as little as “8% of online adults using online social networking sites” (Brenner & Smith, 2013, para. 1). Along with this new form of human communication came new opportunities, both personally and professionally. People found new, convenient ways to stay in touch and share life’s moments with one another while businesses found new, inexpensive ways to reach consumers and increase their revenues.

Many governmental agencies refused to embrace social media at first; many viewing it mainly as a vehicle of recreation. Its benefits were probably not immediately recognized by these organizations that are historically slow to change. As time passed and social media became more popular, agencies discovered that these sites can be used perform a variety of governmental functions, transforming government as we know it. Recognizing the benefits of this new form of social networking, many state, local, and federal governments began adopting social media as a new way to engage the public and promote transparency within government.

As with other branches of government, social media has proven to be a valuable resource to law enforcement agencies locally, nationally, and even internationally. Currently, every American community has access to and uses social media daily. Despite the many benefits and growing popularity of social media, many law

enforcement agencies still refuse to use social media as a resource, wary of the impact it may have on their individual departments. In order to stay effective and relevant during this new age of digital communication, law enforcement agencies must embrace social media and should use it to communicate with the public, gather evidence, and recruit and hire new personnel more effectively and at a lower cost.

## **POSITION**

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) To demonstrate why social media is an indispensable tool to all law enforcement agencies regardless of size and function and (2) to address some common concerns that many of these agencies have about social media. In a recent survey conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, researchers concluded that “95.9 % of agencies surveyed use social media in some capacity....[and] 55.9% of agencies not currently using social media are considering its adoption” (IACP, 2014, para. 3). In addition, this study showed that of the agencies not currently using social media, resource constraints were the most cited obstacles to implementing a social media program within their respective agencies.

Police departments are always looking for additional funding to increase personnel and purchase new equipment in order to keep up with increasing public demands. Funds must be stretched farther and used more effectively in order to ensure that basic services are being provided. A current charge to most police department is to do more with less and to seek out new innovative ways of doing business that are both effective and fiscally efficient. Although this business philosophy is not new to most governments, this approach is especially meaningful to rapidly growing cities and counties that need to expand their infrastructure at a rate that often out paces increases

in their tax base. Given a limited budget to provide basic police services to the public, conduct complex investigations, recruit and train new personnel, and provide timely information to its citizens, many agencies have reached out to electronic social media as a means to increase its capabilities and create a greater presence within the community.

When many people think of social media, social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter immediately come to mind but the term actually encompasses a much broader array of Internet tools and platforms where online communities can come together to share information, ideas, personal messages, and content. Besides social networking sites, social media also includes collaboration websites such as Google Docs; video and image sharing sites such as YouTube, Pinterest, and Instagram, and various blogging and micro-blogging websites.

Recognizing the influence of social media, many police departments began using social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to create a focal point for their message and to create a venue for promoting greater interactivity with its citizens. In an article entitled "Force to sell: policing the image and manufacturing public confidence," authors express the importance of police image by saying "...public support or consent for policing may rest as much on what police are perceived to be doing as what they actually do" (Lee & McGovern, 2013, p. 103). Public image is important to all government agencies because it affects citizen cooperation, public elections, and funding. For example, if a law enforcement agency receives bad media attention because of a recent incident involving excessive force, citizen cooperation may

decrease, giving rise to an increase in citizen complaints and incidents of force. This could serve to perpetuate the negative image, compounding the problem even further.

Law enforcement agencies have realized that one way to combat the problem of negative public image is to open up a clear means of communication between the agency and its citizens. Through the use of social media, agencies are able to control their message and provide clear, concise information to the public that could serve to help correct any misinformation surrounding a particular incident. People gather information from many different sources. Some sources present correct information, some partial information, and some, although rare, present information as fact when it is deliberately false and inflammatory.

Although news media outlets can be a valuable source of information for the public, inaccuracies in reporting may lead to an incident being presented in a way that puts a law enforcement agency in a bad light. Even if an agency provides a reporter with accurate information about an incident, the message is sometimes lost after the reporter has spoken with other parties involved who have different opinions about what occurred during the incident. Despite the fact that the reporter feels like he or she is telling the truth by telling both sides, the presentation of information in an adversarial format by the reporter may inadvertently create a contentious environment between the police and the public.

Aside from being a valuable public relations tool; social media sites are also being used by law enforcement as a powerful investigative tool. In 2014, the International Association of Chiefs of Police conducted its annual survey on law enforcement's use of social media and concluded that social media sites were most

commonly used for criminal investigations and “78.8% of agencies reported that social media has helped solve crimes in their jurisdiction” (IACP, 2014, para. 2).

As a relatively new investigative tool, law enforcement officers have discovered social media to be a great resource for the collection of evidence during criminal investigations, intelligence gathering, and soliciting tips on a specific crime. In the article “Social Media: Establishing Criteria for Law Enforcement Use,” which appeared in the February 2013 online version of the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, author Stuart (2013) states, “Criminals will use social media to share information about their whereabouts and those of their associates. Such electronic information can help apprehend fugitives, single out associate suspects, link individuals to street gangs, and provide evidence of criminal activity” (para. 8).

In a document entitled “Social Media for Recruitment Fact Sheet” put out by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (2011), the author proposes that two major advantages to using social media in recruiting are its low expense and the volume of potential candidates reached through these sites. He states, “Unlike billboards, commercials, or other paid advertisements, use of social media is relatively inexpensive. Account creation is free, but personnel time is required to maintain and update the content” (IACP, 2011, para. 3). In an era of lean budgets and limited resources, law enforcement agencies have had to look for new, inventive ways to attract qualified candidates. Because many of the small to medium sized law enforcement agencies are at a disadvantage when compared to the big recruiting budgets of the larger agencies, these smaller agencies have had to become more creative in their recruiting efforts. By using social media to deliver the department’s recruiting message,



smaller agencies will be able can to gain access to millions of passive and active job seekers daily. This is especially important when attempting to recruit a younger, more diverse applicant pool.

Another advantage to using social media as a recruiting tool is the ability for candidates to communicate with recruiters directly and have their questions answered in a timely manner. During a hiring process, recruiters are often required to provide candidates with updated information about application deadlines, testing, and interviews. Social media gives recruiters a medium in which to communicate with all of the hiring pool at once, reducing the number of man-hours spent answering questions over the telephone and through email.

In addition to using this platform to attract new applicants, recruiters are also using social media to screen applicants during the background investigation phase of the hiring process. This type of screening may range from an agency conducting a general search through one or more internet search engines to requiring an applicant to provide his or her username and password to personal social media accounts. In an online survey conducted by Careerbuilder.com, researchers discovered that nearly two in five companies use social networking sites to research job applicants ("Thirty-seven percent," 2012, para. 2). When asked why they use social media networks to screen applicants, hiring managers explained that they use these sites to determine if the candidate represents him or herself professionally, is a good fit for the company culture, and to look for reasons not to hire the candidate.

Although the use of social media as an applicant screening tool may leave a bad taste in the mouth of some critics, it is often viewed as just another investigative tool for

law enforcement to ensure that they hire the most qualified applicant who can be called upon to sustain public trust. Because law enforcement officials are often held to a higher standard, expected to be incorruptible and free of blemish, agencies must use every tool at their disposal to ensure that they hire the best people for their community.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Although social media has proven to be of great value, it has also brought up some concerns within the law enforcement community, first of which is legality. The 4th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gives people the “right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause” (U.S. Const. Amend. IV, n.d., para.1). Besides protecting people from unreasonable searches and seizures, this amendment also protects a citizen’s right to privacy.

Although certain forms of communication such as telephone calls and emails are considered to be private and are afforded a certain amount of constitutional protection, social media conversations are often considered to be public utterances and fall outside of this legal protection. Cornell Law School, Lisa Schmidt, J.D., expounds this point citing that “government officials may use public information to justify an arrest or conviction, and without Fourth Amendment protection, users may be subject to criminal liability based on personal photographs, location check-ins, or status updates posted on social networking websites” (Schmidt, 2012, p. 517).

As previously mentioned, police departments not currently using social media cite resource constraints as a major obstacle prohibiting their involvement in social media. This is understandable since many departments are already lean on personnel

and spending time on social media may seem like an unnecessary drain on resources, especially for smaller police departments. But maintaining a presence on social media may require less time than many people think.

In "Making the Most of Social Media," Chris Kingsley writes that "Governments report that social media are not much of a drain on their resources. Survey respondents ranked the average time investment required to launch and maintain social media sites, on a scale of 1-5, as a "2", corresponding to "very little" (Kingsley, 2012, p. 15). In a recent study conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, respondents from 600 different law enforcement agencies in 46 states were asked how many hours their agency spent maintaining their social media presence online each week. Of the respondents, 65.9% reported one to five hours; 19.9% reported six to ten hours; 8.8% reported 10 to 20 hours; and the remaining 5.4% reported that they spent 20 or more hours each week maintaining their department's social media sites" (IACP, 2014, p. 10).

Social media sites are designed to be used by the masses and are generally simple to navigate. After the initial public profile is set up, police departments can spend as much or as little time as they want communicating through social media. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that social media is about building relationships and the more time you put into a relationship the stronger the relationship will usually be but a little bit of time will go a long way with social media.

In a document entitled "Building Your Presence with Facebook Pages: A Guide for Police Department," Facebook staff recommend five simple publishing strategies to help law enforcement to successfully engage their communities. First, they emphasize that crime information and public safety announcements are important to members of a

community and that this information needs to be published in a timely manner (“Building your presence,” 2011, p. 10). Secondly, police departments can boost community participation by using social media to showcase and promote local events. Social media is a cheap, efficient way to advertise upcoming events and search for volunteers to assist with these events. Police departments should also use social media to remind citizens that the police department is there to help when needed. They should also be told frequently what steps they need to take in order to receive this help.

Facebook also encourages police departments to use social media in their efforts to locate witnesses and suspects of a crime. When this information is published, it is important to update the status of each case and respond to citizens submitting crime tips in a timely manner. This will help to maximize citizen participation and ensure that the information being received is both current and valid (“Building your presence,” 2011).

And finally, it is important that the agency’s online presence has a lighter side. Because social media serves as a mechanism for building relationship, publishing posts that are sometimes fun and even humorous can present the police department as being friendly and 3-dimensional. It reinforces the fact that officers are human. While it is still important for the agency to always represent itself as an organization that is competent, service-oriented, and fair, this professional image can still be retained even when publishing content that is less than serious in nature.

Public criticism is another major concern for law enforcement managers across the nation. While social media does serve to open the door for greater agency transparency, it also gives people a platform from which volley public criticism at a

department. However, in a study conducted by the Fel's Institute, researchers found that "this kind of criticism is likely [found] where users remain anonymous, such as the comments section of many blogs and video hosting services.....[and] Facebook's lack of anonymity appears to be an important factor here" (Kingsley, 2012, p. 11).

There will always be people who speak out against law enforcement and government in general. Social media is just one more medium being used for this purpose but it also has at least one distinct advantage over other types of media that can help organizations to mitigate and even overcome some of this type of criticism. Social media gives organizations a powerful voice with which to educate the community. It allows them to control their message and helps to bridge the communication gap between themselves and their citizens. Although citizens do have a right to criticize their government and should do so if they want to effect positive change in their community, citizens do not always have all of the facts from which to form a fair, well-informed opinion about a specific matter.

Because social media is interactive, it gives organizations the opportunity to educate citizens on specific issues and answer any questions a citizen may have regarding a particular issue. In her online article that was published by the United States Small Business Administration, Beesley describes the importance of responding to negative criticism in a timely manner. She says that a timely response will serve to stop others from jumping in on the topic while demonstrating the value of the opinion and feedback of others (Beesley, 2012, para. 4).

While it is impossible to avoid negative criticism on social media, much of this criticism can be mitigated through education and relationship building. In this new age

of government transparency through social media, public criticism must be accepted as part of the current landscape. Law enforcement agencies must learn to receive and evaluate this feedback and use it for improvement when possible. As part of a representative government, law enforcement agencies should never fear public criticism. It is not enough for law enforcement agencies to be merely transparent. It must also engage the public and be responsive to the needs of its citizens.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Based on the evidence presented in this paper, it is easy to see that all law enforcement agencies, regardless of size and function, should educate themselves on the benefits of using social media and learn to use it in diverse ways. Through the use of social media, law enforcement agencies are able to build greater trust and credibility within their communities by improving communication with their citizens. This is important because during a time when trust in law enforcement is beginning to falter, social media can be used to increase transparency and restore public confidence.

Social media should also be used to help solve crimes. Law enforcement agencies should seek out and collect valuable information that could aid in the identification of a suspect and capture evidence that would be useful in the subsequent prosecution of a case. This evidence is already available and it does not cost anything to access it. Law enforcement officials just have to decide to seek it out and collect it.

And finally, social media should be used in the recruitment and hiring of new personnel. It is both low cost and effective as a communication tool between recruiters and potential job applicants. Social media also allows competing law enforcement

agencies to provide potential applicants with insight into their culture, values, and overall vision to help them make an educated employment decision.

As previously discussed, there are many reasons why law enforcement agencies should use social media to perform a variety of functions. Despite the many benefits of social media, it is understandable that the newness of this new form of communication can produce at least some skepticism within the law enforcement community. It is easy to understand that the first concern would be one of legality but even limited research would lead law enforcement officials to the conclusion that social media conversations are often considered to be public utterances and fall outside of the legal protection of the 4<sup>th</sup> amendment.

Another common concern of law enforcement executives is one of limited resources. In these lean times, it is understandable that these officials would be concerned that having an active presence on social media would cause an even greater drain on their resources, especially for smaller police department. But this is usually not the case since maintaining a presence on social media usually requires less time than most people think. Because social media is both flexible and scalable, agencies are able spend as much time or as little time as they want working on their online presence. They will just have to develop a needs based strategy that will work for their particular situation.

There will always be people who speak out against law enforcement and government in general. Social media is just one more medium being used for this purpose, but this should not discourage its use. Social media is a powerful communication tool that can be used to educate the public and bridge the

communication gap between law enforcement agencies and their citizens. Despite the fact that social media would provide a new vehicle for public criticism, the relational opportunities it would provide with the public far outweighs any potential threat of any negative criticism.

Without the use of social media, law enforcement agencies will come less effective over time and will lose relevance as technology continues to evolve. In order to stay effective and relevant during this new age of digital communication, law enforcement agencies should embrace social media and use it to communicate with the public, gather evidence, and recruit and hire new personnel more effectively and at a lower cost.



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